Hitchups

by AvannaK

Summary

Hiccup didn't see the point in stopping Astrid as she ran off towards his village—towards his father—with his most desperately protected secret. He was leaving anyway. A coming-of-age tale. Deviates from movie. Borderline bromantic-comedy.
"You are so busted."

They were the last words Hiccup would hear from his long-time crush, and they hurt him more deeply than any dismissal she had given him before. In it bared the painful truth of their distance from one another. Their priorities, their loyalties, their morals—all worlds apart.

The most promising Viking of their age had not even the natural curiosity to find out why the chief’s son had a saddled Night Fury hidden in a cove. Astrid was programmed to never question—just trust authority, trust what she had been taught, and do.

Don't think. Do.

The perfect Viking. The antithesis of everything Hiccup embodied.

"Da-da-da, we're dead," he blew out. He caught the cuff of Astrid’s boot vanish between rocks.
Damn, she was fast.

For one, wild moment Hiccup had the impulse to run after her—to kidnap Astrid and force her stubborn mind to accept the possibility that thousands of years of Viking teachings were incorrect.

His heart skipped a beat as it all played out: He would hop on Toothless, catch her before she reached the village, and take her on a ride that would change her world. It would work. It had to. How could anyone be unchanged by the free, weightless feeling of air pushing at every angle of their body? Or the moist caress of clouds on their cheeks? Or the sight of every towering building and rocky overhang shrunk down to the size of a thumbnail? And all on the back of the reputed "natural enemy"...

If he could just get her on Toothless, Astrid would see for herself the great benefits of befriending a dragon. He could show her the good they were capable of, the pointlessness of this war. They could bond over the experience. He could gain a human companion to talk to—

Hiccup's shoulders slumped and the slightly upturned corner of his mouth fell into a dejected glower. He was getting ahead of himself, like always.

This was Astrid. He could fly her to the northern lights and back and she’d still be ready to take an axe to Toothless.

What did it matter who she told? He was leaving anyway. He had his supplies packed, a note for his father explaining everything without revealing too much...though Astrid shouting about him being in league with the dragons might offset the content of that.

A dark, hulking shape shifted at the corner of Hiccup’s eye. Toothless slunk away, seemingly unconcerned with Astrid’s departure but radiation intense irritation.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa—where do you think you’re going?" asked Hiccup with his own flavor of attitude. Toothless pitched a snort over his shoulder and ambled towards his favorite resting spot beneath the roots of a large conifer. Hiccup pursued.

"Toothless—! Toothless stop! I didn't bring her here, I swear! She must have followed me, she—"

Toothless halted so suddenly that Hiccup tripped over his own feet just to keep from running into the large, dark hide. The dragon nudged Hiccup's swollen wrist with his nose—sprained from Astrid’s quick and skillful snap.

"She doesn't know her own strength," Hiccup tried lamely, wincing at the touch.
Toothless's face said it all: *Bullshit. I don't like her.*

Hiccup hugged the hand to his chest and cast a worried glance at the cove entrance.

"A-anyway, we need to get out of here—my dad's back from the hunt and he seems to be under the impression that I want to kill a Monstrous Nightmare tomorrow. Ha! As if I could!"

He trudged back to his pack, shoulders hunched.

"Ah, who was I kidding anyway? I mean, really, how long did I think this little charade would go on for? I wasn’t thinking—that’s the problem. I didn't think of how it would all end. Of course there was going to be some point where I would have to choose… I’m so stupid…” the mumbled tirade tapered as he stepped over the dropped supplies.

Astrid’s axe—the one he had thrown from her grasp in a rare bout of strength—lay forgotten next to his gear.

Had it not been this particular girl who had told him to *figure out what side he was on*?

"Now I know," he sighed aloud. Never again would it be in question.

Bypassing the weapon, Hiccup gripped the thick, leather strap and slung the woven basket over his shoulder. He teetered for a moment at the awkward weight. The encounter with Astrid left him rattled; he almost walked into Toothless for the second time when he turned to find the dragon trailing two feet behind him.

Toothless prodded the pack with his nose and moaned expectantly.

"No,” Hiccup pushed toothless’s nose away, “there's no fish in there—just some clothes and supplies for myself. As soon as we get settled some place far, far away I'll use it to cart around your lunch again, you spoiled, overgrown salamander."

The Night Fury crooned and rubbed his crown against Hiccup's side. Distress continued to roll off of his human in waves; the boy was scared, hurt and upset, and the absence of the girl did not lessen it as Toothless hoped. Hiccup used that voice—the droll voice—as he often did when he needed a crutch.
Tension ebbed from Hiccup’s face as he absorbed Toothless' warm, unwavering support against his ribs. He placed a hand on top of the dragon's head and gave it a light scratch.

"Com'on bud," he said, feeling far calmer than he had moments ago. He knew, deep down, that he was making the right decision. For both of them. "Lets get out of here before the Vikings start pouring into the cove." It felt weird referring to Vikings as though he were from a separate unit, and at the same time right. Spending most of his life isolated from his own culture likely helped. "Lets head south for now. I think I can survive a little easier in a warmer climate."

Toothless wiggled his butt in excitement before settling to give Hiccup a moment to leg up.

Subconsciously understanding the silent cue, Hiccup placed one foot in a stirrup. He paused, and cast a last look down at the axe—an axe representing the life he planned on leaving behind. An ostracized, misunderstood and lonely life. The Viking life that he could never quite acclimate to.

He felt a strong wave of resentment towards that axe.

"Night Fury!"

One third of the village threw themselves on the ground, despite broad daylight, clear skies, and no dragon in sight. Even with a number of villagers ducking their heads below their hands, Astrid managed to get a good deal of attention as she came bounding out of the northern forests.

"There's a Night Fury—the forest—in a cove—Hiccup's been keeping it a secret!" she gasped, turning to any adult that faced her. "Please! We've got to get over there now, I think he's running away on it!"

Such ludicrous accusations would have most people laughed straight out of Berk. But this was Astrid Hofferson—the most no-nonsense, focused, and domineering Viking of her age group. Arguably, of the island.

Once apparent that no Offspring of Lightning and Death circled the heavens, a crowd began to form around the girl.

"Calm down, lass," a robust woman spoke out over the hysterics. "Tell us clearly—more calmly now."

Taking a deep breath, Astrid did so, more slowly and more clearly so that everyone would understand the severity of the situation. So that they would know of Hiccup's fraudulence. Then they would recognize the true prodigy amongst the newest dragon battlers.

She spoke of her suspicions, her pains to follow him, and finally, in great detail, what she came upon at the base of Raven’s Point.

Everyone, evidently, did not understand her tale.
Small smiles of skepticism turned into a hearty round of chuckles.

Astrid stood, shocked, having never been laughed at before in her life. Heat burned her cheeks and crept down her neck. Hiccup had left—fled the island like a coward and on the back of a dragon like a traitor—and the troll-brained toothpick still managed to aggravate her!

"H-hiccup? My Hiccup?" Stoick said with a laugh half-born of disbelief. Astrid started, not realizing that the chief had been present for her explanation.

Astrid squared her shoulders, as she was taught, even in the face of humiliation.

"It's true, sir," she said. "It was a Night Fury, had to be."

"Nonsense! He sends those dragons running every time he steps in th' rink!" someone shouted from the back of the crowd.

"Because he uses tricks to control them!" Astrid returned, trying to fight off the tenor of desperation with her try mouth and shaking hands. She kept her eyes locked with the Chief's. "The dragon pounced! And when I went to defend myself Hiccup attacked me. He made the dragon stop its attack—he made it listen—but I bet he could make it attack too if he wanted to! He chose to side with the dragon!"

No one listened to her. She saw too many shaking heads. Heard to many murmurs.

She wanted to hit something. She wanted to strike every Viking that chose to believe an absent traitor over her. Panic and discomfort squirmed in her gut.

"Go to the cove just southwest of Raven Point!" Astrid cried out. "I've seen him disappearing off into that direction for weeks now! Ask anybody!

Who sees him during they day when he's not in training? That's where he's been going! That's where the dragon was! A Night Fury!"

And there it was! Under the Chief’s thick red brow, Astrid caught a flicker of doubt in those
Icelandic green irises. Stoick the Vast may have been more knowledgeable on what his son was capable of, after all.

He had only seen Hiccup in the rink once. He still knew his son as someone who could not embrace the Viking way.

Unfortunately, the chief was the only positive reaction Astrid could discern.

"She's probably makin' up stories..."

"...Jealous..."

"Never would have thought it from her, but there yeh have it..."

Astrid saw relief repress the uncertainty in Stoick's stance as the whispers started.

"Settle down, settle down," Stoick called out in his deep, Scottish burr. "Let's not jump to any conclusions. I'm sure Hiccup will arrive back here at whatever hour he usually does 'n' it can all be worked out then. I'm sure this is all a misunderstanding. Until then, let's just let the subject drop."

The restlessness of the crowd eased and, content to think of the best of their new, young prodigy and beloved chieftain, dispersed.

Astrid was left with only rage and despair—a sour shock—until her peers honed in on her.

"What was that about?" Ruffnut asked. Her braids swung as she came to a stop beside the girl. The rest of the guys kept their distance, picking up on the Astrid's hostility.

Astrid shook her head, still experiencing incredulity at being publicly dismissed like that. "This is bullshit."

Snotlout edged closer to Astrid.

"Hiccup had a Night Fury?"

Astrid snapped her head around to face him.

"Called it Toothy or something," she snarled, and her hate for the situation mounted with every breath she took after. She knew full well the thing's name was 'Toothless', but she couldn't bring herself to utter the title as though the dragon could be considered a harmless pet.

This was how he had been beating her in training—he had been getting tricks from the very source.

And just when Astrid thought her temper couldn't raise any higher, she felt her stomach churn once more and an ugly red blotch her cheeks.

It was just so...so... underhanded. So deceitful. So wrong. Dragons attacked them, left and right, for generations. They stole their livestock, left family's starving through the winter, tore limbs from bodies and lives—!

Astrid drew in a shaky breath but it did nothing to settle her ire.

Hiccup went against everything they stood for as Vikings. And his farce had worked so well that some people were willing to believe him over her... when the very thought was laughable not one month ago!
She shoved past Tuffnut's shoulder, ignoring his squawk of indignation, and set a warpath to the training arena. She needed to hit something. Hard.

Unsurprisingly, the gang followed. Gossip trumped survival instincts every time when one lived on an island as small as Berk.

"Was it the one he said he shot down?" Fishlegs asked to no one in particular. Astrid almost stopped; she had completely forgotten about that incident. But now that she thought about it...

"Wait... you mean weeks ago in the last dragon raid?" Tuffnut asked, squinting into the sun. He scratched at a recently acquired burn on his arm as he skipped to keep up with Astrid’s long strides.

"No way did that actually happen," Snotlout said, but the confidence in his voice sounded forced.

He may have respected his cousin for getting first place in dragon training, but taking down a Night Fury back when he was Useless was taking things a bit too far. His pride couldn't handle that.

"No, no, think about it," Fishlegs said, getting excited. He began counting off on his fingers.
"Hiccup uses his invention to take down a Night Fury—so naturally no one believes him. Then he suddenly gets better and better at dragon training, not using anything we were actually taught, and getting, like, plus-one-hundred dragon fighting skills from nowhere—"

Astrid silently listened as she kept her fast pace and absorbed the other perspectives volunteered at her back. The timing did fit with Hiccup's claim...

And how many Night Furies could there be? They seemed so rare...

"And he was gone all day, every day, more or less," Ruffnut mused, recalling on what Astrid shouted at Berk not too long ago. "He made lots of excuses to get away from people..."

Tuffnut rubbed his chin. "It was weird, now that I think about it."

"Yeah, now he thinks about it," Ruffnut muttered, completely ignoring the fact no one else besides Astrid questioned it at the time. Tuffnut bristled.

"At least I wasn't all starry-eyed over him!"

"You were too!" Ruffnut shouted back before realizing that wasn't the argument she should have been making. Shrugging at the insinuation, she gladly accepted her brother's tackle, taking a handful of his dreads and tugging fiercely.

Snotlout continued to shadow Astrid, overstepping Ruffnut's tangle of braids on the ground as she tumbled by.

"You said it attacked you?" he asked.

Astrid crossed the threshold of the Kill Ring, too steamed to give the tussling pair so much as an eye roll.

"Yeah," she said shortly. "He tried to distract me at first from finding it. He was protecting it—protecting a dragon from a Viking! How sick can you get?"

As Astrid vented, Snotlout nodded sympathetically from her side.

"And I should have put two and two together sooner!" Astrid continued with a snarl of self-reproach. "I'd seen him lugging around riding gear, and then I find the dragon with a saddle on its back—"
"He's *riding* the dragon?" Snotlout yelled at the same time the twins crowed: "Cool!"

Fishlegs looked like he may have wet his pants.

Astrid whirled on all of them.

"*It's not cool!*" she barked. "He's a cheat and a traitor! And now he's an outcast! You'll see. He was packed to go—said they were 'going on a vacation forever'. He's not coming back. He left us. And then they," she thrust a shaking finger towards the village, "will all have to acknowledge what he really was. A fake."

Her heart calmed as she shouted the comforting truth. There was nothing cool about riding a dragon, or taming one, or controlling one. Nothing at all. Because it was wrong. Everything about Hiccup Horrendous Haddock was wrong and that's the way things should be. He wasn't a great Viking warrior. He wasn’t better than her through some magical luck. He wasn’t a prodigy or savior to their village.

He spit on them—through lies and betrayal and deception. Then he abandoned them.

Astrid’s universe had shifted back into balance; things were going to be okay for her again. Once this mess was settled, she would be back at the top, where she belonged, leading the fight against dragons. As a Viking should.

She faced forward again and reached for the axe at her back...

Her fingers grasped at air. Her anger returned full force.

"Argh! *Hiccup!*

Chapter End Notes

*cover by ch4rms
*art by inherent rhythm

A MESSAGE TO THE READERS (to prepare/prevent you from jumping into something you may not want to)

Regarding Hitchups:

This is not a romance fic. This is adventure, friendship, drama, humor, family, fantasy, and experience.

Hiccup leaves before "Romantic Flight", therefore before he changes Astrid's mind. This is NOT a pairing fic. The only relationship I focus on is between Hiccup and Toothless. There is no slash or bestiality. Hiccup will meet new people, they’ll influence his life, but there will be no tag-alongs.

This story follows Hiccup through the ages of 15 to 17, taking place between 1000 and 1200 A.D.—gapped because I take historical events from within there and scramble them around.
PLEASE ACKNOWLEDGE THIS TIME PERIOD AND ALL THAT THIS IMPLIES

Hiccup is a recognized adult. Hiccup is also a teenager. He will drink, swear, and encounter sexuality. He will NOT have a OTL. He is not loose, or a player. He has standards, he will be picky. Hiccup has a backbone—grown and fertilized by travel experiences, life choices, and a dragon.

There will be gods and mythology. There will be book references and attempted historical accuracy. There will be Berk, decisions, mistakes, consequences, and loss. Most of all, Hiccup is going to grow up.

Read at your own risk. Not your cup of tea? Then don't drink it! :)

And thank you for reading!
Axed

Chapter Summary

Hiccup comes to terms with his decision and Stoick has to swallow a hard truth.

Chapter Notes

*Art by inherent rhythm

**Ugh, okay, so a note about this fic before you go any further: it was written years ago and I'm always developing as a writer. What this needs is a complete rewrite, but I don't have the time for that (unless I was getting paid; always make time for money). It only got a revision and the style still annoys me.

Personally, I don't think this fic gets really fun until chapter 30 or so. But! Sail on!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Axed

Hiccup nestled against Toothless's stomach—curled into the heated scales—and soaked in the sounds of his surroundings. A vibrato of crickets and hoots weaved through the Highland winds and popping kindle. A wolf howled in the distance. A moderate fire constructed out of driftwood flickered sharply against the blue-black setting.

It was after a lengthy aerial trek—nearly a full day's flight to the southernmost island from of Berk—that Hiccup found himself stretched beneath the stars on an uncharted island. He didn't worry about being followed. Not immediately. It would take days for a ship to reach their point, what with the numerous low-hanging crags and rock stacks acting as obstacles. And that was if the Hooligans knew where to look in the first place.

Flying was a hard mode of travel to track.

Hiccup inhaled and released. Relaxation was impossible; even when fed, warm, and waiting only for the pull of sleep to take him in. His eyelids dipped with the weight of the day, but his mind raced and his stomach suspended.

Talk about Hero to Zero.

The past three weeks were a dream. He, Hiccup the Useless, had been accepted as a Viking among his tribe. He achieved everything he had worked for since he first recognized an anomaly within himself… only to have it taken prematurely. The gratification, the prestige, the option of actually becoming chief… Gone.

Granted, he had built it on falsehoods and deception, but at least people listened to him. At least people looked at him and saw potential. That was all he needed to get his feet off the ground.
Or so he told himself.

Hiccup closed his eyes and tried to immerse his mind into a life where he hadn't been chosen to kill the Nightmare. If he continued as he had, with the eyes and ears of his village open to his methods. Hooligans would eventually take his inventions seriously. They would see him at face value and accept what he was, who he was. Despite not being brawny and boorish, they would listen to his alternatives to fighting...

Toothless sneezed. Hiccup's eyes opened.

Or not. In all honesty, it was too soon to tell how far his newfound fame would have gotten him. If it would have ended in happiness or tragedy. With Toothless accepted or killed.

None of it mattered at this point anyway. He left. He made his choice. There was no point in reminiscing on what could have been.

Then, without prompting, Hiccup thought of his father. Of the pride he heard in Stoick's voice—booming and bragging across the Kill Ring as Hiccup was hoisted over the crowd. The boy could not remember a time when he'd heard that tone... a tone he'd waited to be directed at him for years. A taste of utopia, cruelly snatched away. He would be forever taunted with the phantasm of what their relationship should have been had he only been born "right".

Emotion welled; not just at his own loss but also at the subjugation and scrutiny his father would endure because of him.

He turned his eyes toward the blinking stars above and mumbled, "I hope my Dad's okay..."

Toothless lifted his head and the great reptile's eyes flashed in the bright moonlight. Through forces unknown, Hiccup could completely understand the dragon's opinion of the involuntary remark.

"He's not that bad," he felt the need to say. "He's a good guy."

Toothless purred.

"No, really! He's just...the chief, you know? He's so Viking that he couldn't possibly understand someone who's..." Hiccup paused to look down at himself, "uh, not so-Viking. Which I guess is why it's good that only Vikings live this far north..." For all his complaints, even Hiccup had to chime in on jibes against Southerners. "And for his own son to be, well, like me... that must have been hard on him. I know he probably had a rough time facing other tribes and seeing their perfect heirs..."

Bitterness crept into his voice before he could stop it. He swallowed back the ugly feeling.

"Sorry," Hiccup muttered, rubbing a hand over his face.

The part that hurt the most, more than leaving his father childless, more than smothering that far-but-bright glint of a possible future on Berk, was the cold, unarguable truth that everyone's lives would be better now that he was out of their hair.

His father could focus on running the village and Snotlout was the obvious next heir (there was even the possibility he would have taken over with Hiccup around). Hiccup wouldn't be there to aggravate Astrid, or for the twins to pull pranks on, and there were tons of candidates who would be a better apprentice in the smithy than he was...

"I made the right choice," he whispered to himself and he found little comfort in making the announcement. Toothless chuffed against his hair like some draconic show of moral support.
Hiccup smiled and brushed the dislodged bangs from his eyes.

It was hard to smile. It was difficult to stay optimistic. Hiccup was scared. He closed a door behind him and there was no safety net beneath. There was no going back—an option he may have had had no one seen Toothless, but that opportunity was wiped from the table the moment they encountered Astrid.

Gods! If it were anyone else—Fishlegs, perhaps—things might have played out different. But it was Astrid. Astrid, who was so gung-ho about killing dragons she had perfected a war cry by the time she was nine. Astrid, who hated Hiccup. He wasn't stupid. He saw the hostility she directed at him over the past week. She didn't like being upstaged and she certainly didn't like being upstaged by him. Seeing Toothless was the final straw.

The look she last gave him… Hiccup would never forget. Utter disgust twisted her face, eyes hard with the promise retribution for his choices.

*Gods and she would have killed Toothless!* Hiccup could see it again. The glint of sun against her axe. The energy, the fear, the terror that stung his gut in the hours that followed… He had thrown his body at her before the situation fully registered and he would thank Odin every day for that.

Hiccup shoved down the rancor bubbling towards the girl and tilted his head back at Toothless.

"So, where do you want to go?" he asked.

Toothless whirred and directed his triangular head southeast in accordance to the stars.

"That way, huh?" Hiccup pointed in the same direction with his arm. "Yeah… that's heading towards Jutland. Hey! If we keep heading in that direction we should eventually reach Miklagard! My mother lived there for a bit—dad told me so. She said it's the largest city ever built! They have this really big wall to keep Vikings from sailing in there, but that won't be a problem for us, will it buddy?"

Toothless crooned his agreement like a human would wave off a child's enthusiasm. The dragon instead motioned towards the axe that Hiccup decided to drag along seconds before their departure. The weapon lay amongst Hiccup's meager belongings, its blade gleaming in the quivering firelight, majestic and mocking.

Toothless did not like that axe for many reasons. For one, it belonged to the awful girl who hurt his sweet boy (*because who in their right mind would try to hurt Hiccup? Why not just kick dragon eggs!*). The second being that it was one more sharp object just waiting for a chance mishap with the boy. Not that Hiccup was the walking disaster his people seemed to believe him as; Toothless had seen Hiccup move and run and play with grace only seen in dragons.

Lastly, it implied that he was not enough protection for Hiccup. Insulting.

Hiccup, for his part, felt a sudden and inadvertent need to defend himself from the dragon's stare.

"Hey, don't judge me! I just couldn't leave it there!"

*You could have.*

"It would be a waste to have a perfectly good blade destroyed by the elements."

*She would have returned for it.*

"It could come in handy if I get in trouble."
"How dare you."

"Okay… and maybe I wanted to piss her off a little."

Toothless cocked his head to the side.

"It's just..." Hiccup ran a tense hand through his hair. "It's just that I had this whole "escape plan" sort of formulated, you know? I left this… this note for my dad…playing up my, ah, inability to fit in. I sort of hinted that I had been outsmarting the dragons rather than defeating them, which was kind of a confession, right? Oh, and I mentioned how I simply could not kill a dragon—which also played into my 'not-fitting-in' thing. And said that I'm choosing the life of an outcast."

Gods, he was an outlaw. Fjörbaugsgarður. He couldn't return to Berk for at least three years.

Hiccup took another breath.

"I... I tried to make it look like a self-exile. But with Astrid finding out my real reason for leaving and tattling—oh come on, you know she did! You saw her—that'll make me look like a traitor too. Which, I am, I guess..." He paused to wet his lips. "I just... I just wanted my dad to feel more... more disappointment than betrayal about this."

Hiccup lowered his head to his hands and moaned.

"I really buggered this one up, didn't I bud? I don't know what I was doing. I guess I messed up my life the moment I let you..."

"Live."

The Night Fury nudged Hiccup's thigh with his nose and moaned. Gaze trained on the fire, Hiccup reached over and inattentively scratched the scales just over Toothless' left eye.

"Maybe it's unfair of me to pin all my anger on Astrid...but she didn't even give me a chance to explain! There was no...no curiosity. Like nothing in her head told her to hear me out." He couldn't understand it. He hoped to never understand it. "She was just another mindless slave to the Viking code. If she had just waited a few moments—listened for a bit—she would have seen...she could have realized..."

Hiccup dropped his head back and closed his eyes.

"And now everything is so messed up..."

His human's distress tinged the salted air and Toothless's jaw fins rippled. He shifted his weight to curl his heavy tail across Hiccup's lap to further draw the boy in warmth.

Hiccup smiled at the gesture.

"I guess I should sleep on this, shouldn't I, Bud?"
Toothless gurgled shortly.

"Right. We'll head out first thing tomorrow. I don't know what I'd do without you," Hiccup yawned as the drain hit him. "You keep me sane..."

Watching as the thin eyelids slipped closed, Toothless accepted Hiccup's bid goodnight. The dragon remained awake for much longer than his human, with ears twitching at every sound in protectiveness bordering on paranoia, all the while sending the inert axe looks of the deepest loathing.

When Stoick entered his home it was for the purpose of escaping the questioning stares of his people, the accusing glower of that girl, and to enjoy the comfort of his favorite chair while he waited for his son to return and sort things out.

He had not anticipated The Letter. The stained parchment that terrified and agitate him, that drove him to order Astrid Hofferson to lead a number of his warriors to search the cove she spoke of.

"Self exile..." Stoick muttered, scanning the letter for the hundredth time. It was formal, tersely worded, and addressed to "The Chief" — not to "father". Though the writing was unmistakably Hiccup's.

In it spoke of Hiccup's inability to embrace the Viking lifestyle and the overall benefit for both parties of his leaving. It was signed Hiccup. No Haddock. No III. Just Hiccup.

Self-imposed exile indeed.

Stoick's eyes lingered on certain phrases for his mind to interpret.

"...used methods to give the illusion of taking down dragons..."

Tricks.
"...renounce any birthrights..."

Quitting.

He tried to make sense of it all, but Stoick could not have foreseen this. Hiccup would have spoken to him first if it were simply a feeling of displacement. Outlaw was a serious thing—even lesser outlaw. Anyone who held a grudge against the boy would now be entitled to kill him on sight and gain status for it.

No, Hiccup was smarter than that. There had to be more to it.

Stoick thought of Astrid and her wild tales of betrayal.

If the reason for Hiccup's absence were of another nature, a more sinister nature...

Stoick shook his head. It couldn't be—not his Hiccup. The boy was a nuisance on a good day, but he was far too innocent and frank to engage in such deceitful ventures.

Yet, doubt returned again.

Astrid mentioned Raven Point and a Night Fury of all creatures. Just as Hiccup had weeks earlier. While it could have been a coincidence on either point—

"Stoick!" a deep voice boomed from the other side of his home's door. The wood rattled under heavy banging. His brother.

Stoick wrenched the door open to see a remorseful Spitelout and Hoark.

"Well?" Stoick prompted. "What'd yeh find?"

His impatience wasn't justified; he would have known himself had he gone with them. But the letter stole the steadiness from Stoick's legs. He'd rather the village believed it was confidence in his own son that kept him at home, but he suspected his brother saw through the farce if his stark-white knuckles gripping the door were any reflection of his complexion.

Hoark stepped forward and held out a handful of perfect and gleaming black dragon scales.

"They were everywhere," Hoark reported. "Undeniably dragon, and none we've ever seen. They definitely match that of the girl's description of a Night Fury."

Stoick opened his mouth to give his old friend an angry thrashing for even suggesting the wild story was true when Spitelout cut in.

"There was evidence of human habitation as well. A scorched campfire with burnt kindle, sharpened sticks, several footprints and body prints—some barely even a day old...and not all of which were human. And the human prints...the size...well, there's just no getting around it, Stoick."

Spitelout spoke in an unusually slow, low voice, as though he were trying to soothe the chief while simultaneously delivering incriminating evidence about Stoick's son.

The chief of the Hairy Hooligan tribe could feel his entire world crumble. A certain sort of misery he had not felt since his wife left resurfaced; a misery of isolation and loss. A child's wild story he could discredit, but only a fool would refute the hard proof in Hoark's hand and Spitelout's expert tracking skills. And no fool had ever made a half-decent chief.

His title was the only thing he had left in his life. He had no family, no heir, but he had his tribe.
"Chief," Hoark tried after a long moment of silence on Stoick's part, "the evidence is overwhelming...what the Hofferson girl said about your son—"

Stoick crushed the letter in his hand.

"I have no son," he hashed out in a strangled undertone. Hiccup had betrayed them. The letter was a ruse; an excuse a devil-sympathizer used to escape having to kill one.

Admitting his only son had gone rogue in the worst sort of fashion was no simple task, so Stoick focused on his last comfort.

A surprising passion ignited within him. Angry, hurt, and still fighting off the natural pull of denial, Stoick wanted war. He wanted to hit something, to tear it apart and to commit grisly kills. The dragons would pay for enchanting his son away from him, and he looked forward to the next raid. Unfortunately, the ice would be setting in within the next couple of months and leaving on another empowered Nest-excursion was unwise.

Come spring, the dragons wouldn't know what hit them.


The village had learned of what transpired in the cove before the next morning sun could fully separate from the horizon.

Stoick the Vast's son was in league with the dragons.

Shock rippled through the morning gossip.

"I knew it!" cropped up around high noon.

By nattmál a majority of "good riddance" became the village consensus, with a healthy dose of sympathy for their chief.

Of course Hiccup the Useless would find a way to turn himself against their village. Several villagers agreed they had seen it coming, that the boy was touched by the hand of Loki himself and doomed to bring misfortune.

Some villagers, particularly his former classmates, were in varying states of dubiety.

Fishlegs was openly disheartened; crushed that someone he grew to admire would betray them. Seeing Hiccup's rise to fame gave the nerdy Viking hope that one day he too could impress the village. Learning that it was a fluke destroyed that cautious optimism.

Ruffnut was too focused on Astrid's actions to belie Hiccup for his.

"What I can't believe is that you would see a dragon—a Night Fury of all things—with a saddle on and not try to ride it," she argued for the umpteenth time.

"Why would I ever want to ride a dragon?" Astrid snapped back, and she looked rather close to striking the other blonde. "It's disgusting. Disgraceful! I kill dragons. I like killing dragons—love it—I don't ride them!"

"There was a saddle already on the Thor-damn dragon!" Ruffnut badgered. "That's practically a sign
from Odin saying 'Hey! Ride me!''

"I'd rather ride a Roman horse!"

"Sacrilege!"

Tuffnut felt at a loss to see his sister fighting with someone other than himself.

Snotlout was caught between outrage and glee. While he was one of the last in his class to be impressed by Hiccup—second only to Astrid—and finding his cousin's success suspicious for most of their training, he eventually joined the masses in their admiration for the boy's effective handling of the beasts. That Hiccup had chosen the dragons' side was a bit of a slap in the face for everyone, and Snotlout did not take kindly to being upstaged by posers.

At the same time, he was now next in line to be chief and the most eligible suitor for Astrid—provided she didn't get married off before he became of age. Other than a bruised pride, Hiccup's decision to ride off into the sunset on the back of a Night Fury provided more pros than cons as far as he was concerned.

Astrid was pleased, overall—aside from constantly having to defend herself from the psycho Thorson twin. She had her reputation back while getting rid of her competition at the same time.

Sometimes, when she would see the chief's disparaging scowls he tried to hide, or the empty spot at the Mead Hall where Hiccup used to sit, she would question her brash actions. Any and all feelings of doubt would be dealt with quickly and swiftly, in the same manner she handled everything else in her life. In the end, she knew she made the right decision. Vikings were upfront, no-nonsense people. It was how they kept their government from falling corrupt. Allowing Hiccup to continue his charade would only begin the plague of lies and deceit that had destroyed countless cultures before. This was her way of preserving the peace. Nothing to feel ashamed of, at all.

Besides, she could never forgive him for stealing her axe.

Chapter End Notes

I hope I kept the characters "in-character", so to speak. I'm trying to stay true to the personalities that were displayed *before* the village discovered Toothless.
Also, I'm making this so Berk is settled around the Faroe Islands. Thanks for reading!
Bogged

Chapter Summary

Hiccup gets into the swing of Outlawry and bumps into an unexpected Viking.

Bogged

Hiccup knew he would run into a problem sooner or later. He knew it. Everything had been going far too smoothly thus far.

He and Toothless managed to slowly make their way across islands, migrating towards the continent islet by islet. They made frequent stops for food, rest, or simple, leisurely skylarking. In fact, without the need for sneaking around in his own village, or the fear of discovery hanging overhead, the past two weeks had proven to be the best in Hiccup's life. He was free from the constraints of his village, laws he no longer adhered to thrown to the wind, and he was finally able to enjoy being himself.

Four days prior his first bout of bad luck struck when his map was blown into the ocean. Since then Hiccup had been counting landmasses and putting island stops to memory. He had a very loose idea where he was, but he hated not knowing.

Toothless bunkered down in the sun some ways off on the other side of the island they settled on. He allowed Hiccup to explore the island for food on his own with a warning snort to keep out of trouble. Hiccup continued to campaign his ability to fend for himself...on most days.

Still, Hiccup wasn't worried. He had his dagger and knew that it would only take a holler for Toothless to come to his rescue should he run into anything he couldn't handle.

Unfortunately, Hiccup disregarded any potential, sticky-fingered Vikings when he settled with that precaution.

"Hiccup!"

And Hiccup's two weeks of idle fun were over as a memorable girl threw herself in his face with all the ferocity of an ignited Nightmare—a pleasant, customary greeting by Viking standards.

"Uh, uh-Camicazi," Hiccup choked out after a moment of goggling.

He couldn't, for the life of him, fathom why the Bog-Burglar suddenly stood before him. Moments ago he had been alone-enjoying a walk along the edge of the forest, looking for a light snack via foraging and enjoying one of the last days of pure sun before the cold season.

Hearing his name shouted in his ear by the young thief threw him in a moment of a surreal detachment. Awareness came. Then anxiety.

"Wha-what are you doing here?"

Hiccup grimaced almost as soon as he uttered the words. They were the same he used on Astrid not so long ago.
Look how *that* turned out: a graceless escape.

Camicazi put a hand on her hip, drawing Hiccup's attention to the full scabbard by her side. He hadn't seen her in nearly two harvests and she had not changed much: still the same long, blonde hair, still loaded with any sort of blade imaginable, and still deceptively tiny.

"Well, we're coming back up from East Anglia, of course." She gestured behind her to the far end of the southern shore, where dozens upon dozens of Viking longships dotted the rolling coast, no doubt filled to the brim with armed and dangerous Bog Burglars. Hiccup wanted to slap himself; how *unobservant* could he get?

The Bog-Burglars were what could tentatively be labeled as "frenemies" of the Hairy Hooligans. They were one of the few clans who traded regularly with his tribe—about once a year at the most—and were always up from some *harmless* competition at each gathering: be it races, sparing, or drinking contests. Stoick the Vast and Big-Boobied Bertha had a deep-rooted rivalry and were known for being incapable of standing in one another's presence without having their voices escalate to a deafening volume.

They *invented* bellowing contests.

Camicazi was the heir to the Bog-Burglar tribe and one of the few Vikings that Hiccup actually got along with—though their familiarity could be due to their status as children of the chieftains. Since their first meeting, they were thrown together at every opportunity; perhaps to smooth along a possible engagement, or at the very least improve their future standing as traders. Camicazi's strong, adventurous personality with Hiccup's passive, nonconformist attitude kept them from butting heads too often. Eventually, and after a few trouble-making episodes, a mutual amity settled between them.

"I got to join the trip this year," she continued. Pride bordering on arrogance seeped into her voice. "Mum thought it was about time I saw for myself how to barter and burgle—not that I needed any help with the burgling, mind you—but it was a blast anyway. Wasn't much in Hunstanton, but on the way up we hit Lindisfarne and, hoo-boy, let me tell you, it's a miracle we could get the boats to float—we got so much booty. Shame they didn't put up much of a fight. It's just not the same when they roll-over so quickly, ya know?"
Hiccup nodded dumbly, his mind more occupied with an escape.

"Anyway," Camicazi went on without need for breath, "we're heading back up into home territory now and I can tell we're gonna get some good dealings with the stuff we got. There's not a lot of civilization on this part of the Orkneys, 'course, but we needed to stop for some game—"

Hiccup snapped to attention.

"Wait—we're on the Orkney islands? Right now?"

Camicazi pursed her lips at the interruption.

"Uh, no kidding," she said. "What kind of Viking are you? This is Corn Holm!"

Slightly embarrassed, Hiccup nodded. He tried to keep track of where he was going—he counted the Shetland Islands as he flew overhead—but he knew he was at the point where he needed a new map.

"Right, yeah. I figured that..." He vowed to get a chart of some sort the next settlement they came across. Odin-forbid he wake up one morning and find himself at the wrong end of a Saxon spear.

"So where is your tribe?" Camicazi cut into his thoughts. She made a show of trying to peer into the forest over his shoulder. "You guys moored on the other side of the island? We didn't see anyone else coming in on this side."

The only thing on the other side of the island was Toothless.

"No, no. Just me," Hiccup insisted hastily. Perhaps his answer came too ready because Camicazi narrowed her eyes.

"Just you?"

"Yep. Me. All by myself."

_No dragon chaperone. Not here._

"What are you doing here by yourself?"

"Oh y'know..." Hiccup eyed the fleet of ships, "just on a trip."

Camicazi's dubious expression turned excitable.

"Ooooh! Are you on a mission from your dad? Are you being tested as a worthy heir and warrior? I'll probably be doing that meself if Mum would let me. She practically had me on a leash the whole time—I hardly got to fight _at all!_"

As Hiccup recalled, Camicazi liked to fight almost as much as she liked to talk.

"So, where's your boat?" Camicazi asked, searching the shore for his mode of transportation.

"Oh, somewhere on the other side of the island...I've just been exploring the grounds...y'know, looking for stray animals and such..."

"So, you're hunting alone?" she asked, the speculative look back on her face. Hiccup felt himself flush under her scrutiny, rather aware that he looked like the last person to be solo hunting. That and he was currently only armed with a dagger.
"I can handle myself fine," he said with a bit more aggression than he intended. Hanging around with a creature as proud as Toothless may have enforced his own sense of pride. Toothless did not tolerate his habit of belittling himself, and in response Hiccup felt less inclined to let other people depreciate him.

The girl raised her hands. "I meant no offense. But you gotta admit you're pretty scrawny. Don't look like much, ya'know?"

Hiccup said nothing; he stared imperiously down at her.

Camicazi developed her own scowl.

"Fine, fine..."

"Camicazi!"

Hiccup's blush drained into a ghostly countenance. He'd heard that voice on a number of occasions before, and the conditioned response of fear emerged with its echoes.

"Oh, I guess I better get going," Camicazi said, unfazed and staring, listless, in the direction of her ships.

"Cami! Git yer skinny little butt over here!"

The broad figure of Camicazi's busty mother, Big-Boobied Bertha, emerged over a crest of rocks. She was but a dot at that distance, yet no less imposing.

"Oh, I know! You should come and talk to mum!" Camicazi expressed to Hiccup brightly. "She's been mentioning going up north again. Like I said, we got some good stuff from Lindisfarne, I bet your dad would love it. Especially the mead! Oh man, is it good—only don't tell mum I've been drinking it! Oh, and we've been running low on dragon-hide vests. The best comes from Berk, everyone knows it—but don't tell my mum I said that either!"

Hiccup, leaned back, alarmed, and quickly wrenched his arm out of Camicazi's grip when she started to drag him back to her ships.

"Uh...uh...no. Nope!" Hiccup chuckled weakly. "Can't. See, I'd love to but...I'm on a schedule. I have things—important things—I can't possible reschedule. Busy, busy, busy—that's me! Maybe some other time, when I'm less busy...with terribly important things..."

Like getting the Hel outta there.

"Who's that with you?" Bertha yelled as she neared.

Panic seized Hiccup. He stumbled backwards faster. Camicazi stared after him, curious, but made no move to stop him from withdrawing into the forest.

"You probably shouldn't mention you saw me," Hiccup added, making his way into the trees.

"But—"

"Tell your mom I'm a hallucination!" And Hiccup slipped into the shadows.

The petite girl stood, speechless, for a moment longer, trying to process what just happened. She didn't notice her mother arrive until a heavy hand landed on her shoulder.
"Camicazi!" Bertha barked, causing her daughter to jerk under her hold. "Did you not hear me callin' yeh? What is wrong with you, child? 'N' who was that?"

"I think we should have checked those raspberries a little better before we ate them," Camicazi said faintly. She knew Hiccup as weird, mostly thanks to his habit never explaining his thought process before acting, but this time took the biscuit.

Experience also taught her that if Hiccup were up to something crazy, it was in one's best interest to stay out of the way.

"It was a hallucination," she informed her mother.

Hiccup darted through the underbrush; the leather on the soles of his moccasins contoured to the ground to help silence his steps. He had no fear of being followed—scary as Big-Boobied Bertha was, Hiccup was confident in his speed over hers. His only concern at the moment was Toothless. He didn't know how long the Bog-Burglars had been on the island, or how they'd spread, and he prayed to the gods that Toothless knew enough to stay hidden.

Bogs weren't great dragon killers—not like the Hooligans, who were more experienced thanks to their close location to the nest; a single Viking of Berk could take on a dragon if pushed. The Bog-Burglars, on the other hand, were more adept at fighting other humans, and a good variety at that due to their wider range of travels.

But enough of them together could take out one Night Fury. Of that, Hiccup was sure.

"Toothless!" he called as he reached the grotto where they set up camp. His heart lightened when he saw the dragon on the same sunny rock where he left him.

Toothless lifted his head at the sound of his name.

"Hey buddy," Hiccup said as he approached, relief heavy in his voice. He placed a hand on the dark snout.

Toothless whuffed into it, looking concerned.

"It's nothing," Hiccup assured him. He still gasped for breath. "There are just some Vikings on the other side of the island. I think we should take off from here and keep going south."

Toothless cocked his head and glanced at the sun. They had been mostly travelling at night to take advantage of Toothless' element and napping often during the day to recharge. A black dragon flying about in broad daylight would be sure to grab unwanted attention. Especially when there was a human on top.

"We stay low, fly farther out to sea, east bound, and then find cover in the clouds," Hiccup decided on the spot. He held his hand over his eyes and scanned the sky. "It looks like there's enough to keep us safe for a while. They'll probably think we're a large bird if they manage to spot us at all."

Toothless stood, arched his back and stretched his claws, and waited for Hiccup to fix the saddle into place. Hiccup went about gathering his belongings and securing his seating.
He tisked and plucked a worn fin string.

"I'm going to have to get some materials to reinforce these," he muttered. They would hold for now, but it wouldn't do to have his control over the tail fin snap midflight.

He pulled himself onto the saddle with practiced ease; the woven pack he carried hadn't hindered his movements in the slightest.

Toothless and Hiccup's motions were in sync as they took off, gliding along the water until they were far enough to risk rising higher. Hiccup flicked his ankle to position three and the pair began to climb vertically.

Cool, low-hanging clouds dampened his cheeks and Hiccup reveled in the sense of security and freedom he always felt at his preferred altitude. He was safe from the Vikings once more and he was back in the air where he belonged.

"The good news is that we're closing in on Scotland," he hollered over the wind. We can get a map and materials there, and probably keep to the coast until—"

Hiccup's stomach rudely interrupted his planning. He scowled down on it, suddenly recognizing the ache as hunger.

"Aw, damn. I forgot to eat."

Toothless snorted.

You ate that rabbit on the island before you went foraging.

Hiccup could nearly feel his dragon judging him.

"I was still hungry!" he defended, point to his stomach. "Listen! I know you can hear it!"

If you get too fat I won't be able to carry you.

"And don't even think about complaining about my weight! If you could carry that elk back in Fetlar while carrying me, then you are in no position to whine!"

I can't carry two elks.

"And I'm not going to get to be the size of an elk, no matter how much I eat."

Look at your father—it's in your blood!

"Don't even go there!"
In need of money, Hiccup takes a leaf out of Camicazi's book and does something daring.

**Words spoke in a language OTHER than Norse will be *italicized***

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The autumn air was crisp to begin with, but a high altitude coupled with windchill had Hiccup's eyes watering at the stinging bites to his nose and cheeks. The rest of his body remained warm, both due to his extra layers of clothing and the hot blood pumping through his body at the thought of what he was about to do.

As it turned out, running into Camicazi had its benefits. Aside from a reminder of his geographical ignorance, she also indicated that there were riches to be found if he kept to the Northumbrian coast.

Hiccup initially thought of sneaking around stealing maps and smithy supplies to secure the tailfin, but that led to him pondering what he would do with supplies if he didn't have a shop to work in. Sneaking into a blacksmith's workshop to make foreign supplies would be more difficult to pull off than it was worth risking.

He came to the eventual conclusion that he would have to make an order and purchase materials, and that would call for more money.

With only his personal earnings—a thin sack of silver pieces—at his disposal, Hiccup knew his resources for trade were wanting. He spent the last four days hanging around coastal towns trying to find work. It wasn't easy—especially as English slowly replaced Norse the further south he went, and people in general weren't willing to employ foreigners.

What Hiccup found, instead, was gossip regarding recent piracy activity. And with Camicazi still fresh in his mind, Hiccup couldn't dislodge the appeal of fast cash.

Besides, if he was going to steal from anybody he'd rather it were from thieves.

It was this strain of logic that led Hiccup to where he hovered now: fifty meters above a recently commandeered merchant carrier—the distinctive square sails told him as much. He had been circling the slow moving ship like a vulture, breaking down the best way to go about breaking and entering. The coast was still in sight—swimming distance if nothing else—and a plan quickly constructed within his mind.
Aside from the helmsman, only two watchstanders moved about the decks. Hiccup flew freely overhead; human eyes had a hard time spotting a Night Fury with only stars for light.

"Alright, this is perfect," Hiccup muttered to Toothless' sensitive ears. "Looks like a merchant carrier. Lots of goods, little security."

He directed their flight towards the stern of the ship where, two levels down from the highest piece of deck, large windows spanned the jutted structure.

"...and that's the great cabin. It'll definitely have money in there. ...The navigation room should be a floor above it; they usually are."

He could grab a map and kill two birds with one stone.

Below, the helmsman yawned and rubbed his eye. The watchstander on the stern deck said something in a foreign language, most likely Gaelic, his voice loud against the startling quiet of the night, and he left his post to wander toward his companion.

"Let's go," Hiccup breathed upon spotting their opportunity.

He swiftly landed Toothless on the fantail, close enough to the body of the ship so that he could drop onto the poopdeck. He stuck to the edge, clinging to the shadows in case the watchstander came back.

Hiccup's heart thudded painfully against his ribs and he couldn't tell if it was excitement or anxiety that had him relishing the moment.

"Okay, you know what your part is, right?" he whispered.

Toothless nodded.

The pathetically easy part? Of course.

"Good. Once you get in the water, count to one hundred before you fire. That should give me some more time to get where I need to be before chaos ensues." Hiccup smiled at the dragon with more confidence than he felt. "Oh, and if I start screaming from being tortured by pirates... start lighting everything on fire."

Toothless smiled back, probably with more confidence than necessary.

Will do.

The dragon crouched as jungle cat would before springing from his perch, leaving his human on the boat. He spread his wings to glide into the water, landing with nothing more than a 'kurplunk'.

"What was that?" the closer watchstander said, alarmed and looking out towards the sea. He moved down to the quarterdeck with quick, heavy footfalls and glanced over the rail.

The helmsman yawned again. He blinked at his companion.

"Nothing. A fish."

"Nah, sounded big."

"Then a big fish."
Despite his words of assurance, the helmsman left the wheel to get a peek for himself.

Hiccup crept down the stairs to the sterncastle deck, eyeing the helmsman's back. The two men were observing the inky-black abyss from over the edge of the carrier—an unquestionably vain attempt at catching sight of Toothless, but he was still thankful for the distraction.

He approached the door to what he hoped was the navigation room, still keeping to the skeleton of the boat to avoid unwelcome creaks.

"It was nothing," the helmsman said, moving to turn back to the helm. Hiccup leapt the last few steps, wrenched open the door only inches from its frame and squeezed in as swiftly as he could, shutting the door with a wince set in his face.

He heard the voices continue.

"What is it?"

"I thought I saw—nothing. Trick of the light."

"You're too trusting."

"You're too suspicious."

Hiccup waited in the dark room with bated breath for several long seconds.

No one approached.

He slowly released the air in his lungs, his heart still taking up too much of his notice. Feeling secure, he took in his surroundings.

It was definitely the navigation room. Through the blue-hued moonlight, Hiccup could make out charts, writing utensils, large, brass compasses, all scattered across boards and surfaces.

He went straight to the desk in the center of the room.

"Map, map, map..." Hiccup chanted softly under his breath, his fingers tracing over the mess of papers, partially unrolling scrolls and then tossing them away. He thought he'd be more shaken with his situation but power thrummed through his veins, leaving him unusually calm. He felt he could breath easier, that he could move faster, if need be.

He fumbled upon some rolled-up, grid-lined paper.

"Map!" he cheered in a loud whisper.

He spread the parchment and observed its contents. It had the North Sea, the Black Sea, and the Norwegian Sea with their respective surrounding landmasses present. He saw the islands where Berk was located, he saw the long border of Frankia, and he saw the extremely foreign lands where the sun supposedly burned hotter than the warmest summer of Berk.

It showed everything he needed.

"Next step, money," he muttered.

He spun on his heel and squinted, searching for something darker he could conceal himself in; even a blanket or stole would do. His current clothing consisted of browns and greens, his usual color scheme—not exactly ideal for hiding on pirate ships. The forest, yes, pirates, no.
His efforts bestowed him with a couple cloaks hung besides the door, no doubt belonging to the original crewmen. Hiccup donned both of them—the beige one first, and then the black one overtop. Though further saddled by clothing, he would be warm enough to survive his escape plan, which did not involve flying.

He leaned against the wall, inches from the door, and waited.

'Come on, Toothless. Any second now...'

 Toothless had an aerodynamic build that allowed him to break through any element, be it air or water. Granted, his handicap hindered his maneuverability but he still made it to the front of the ship far faster than any human could hope to.

...89, 90, 91...

He counted in human numbers learned from Hiccup; unsure of how fast or slow he should go about it. Hiccup hadn't been too specific, but he trusted his boy to trust him.

...92, 93, 94, 95, 96...

Toothless eyed the spar extending forward from the front of the ship. The bowsprit, as Hiccup called it.

...97, 98, 99, 100!

Taking a second to gather gas in the back of his throat, Toothless let loose a powerful sphere of blue flame and struck true as his nature dictated.

The boat shook with the force, the bow immediately alight like a lone and baleful torch outstanding in the hours of darkness. The first shout of alarm rang against the night, quickly chorused by others.

Toothless submerged back into the water and shot beneath the shallow waves to position himself at the other end of the boat.

Now to wait for Hiccup.

Hiccup didn't have to wonder when Toothless made his strike. Pandemonium broke out the moment the bowsprit caught fire.

He creaked the door open enough to catch a glimpse of the sterncastle deck. It was empty, the helmsman leaving his post to attend to the flames. Hiccup moved out. He crept down the steps to the quarterdeck, keeping to the shadows with the black hood drawn over his head. He waited against the stairs as men sprinted from the mate's quarters-men who didn't even glance around to search for the source of commotion. Toothless' attack served as a beacon of attraction to the pirates, just as Hiccup had hoped.
Pirates were like Vikings, and Vikings were predictable.

After a beat of no activity from the cabin area, Hiccup deemed it safe enough to give it a shot. He entered the quarters with the same stealth he employed all night; breath shallow, weight on his toes. He slunk past doorways open to hammock-laden rooms; a few of the hammocks still had bodies snoozing in them—heavy sleepers or unconcerned crewmen. Either way they paid him no notice. Hiccup kept his eyes trained forward, locked on the single door that had to be the great cabin.

He paused as he reached it, pressing his ear to the thick wood for sounds of stirring, trying to block out the muffled cries at the other end of the ship.

Nothing.

Hiccup slowly pulled the door open, keeping all his senses on alert for movement on either side. It was heavy, thick, and scraped against the floor. Twice Hiccup paused in opening it. No one came. He flit inside.

A candle was left on a table to send shadows moving at every corner of the room; Hiccup's breath started a couple of times, thinking it was a person lurking, waiting to strike. But the abandoned bed with its ruffled sheets pointed to the obvious: the captain had left to see what the problem was.

Biting his lip, Hiccup shut the door behind him and immediately descended on the pirate's belongings. The piles of clothes caught his attention first, each article so varied from the next in style and material that it was obvious everything was stolen. Beneath a throne of silk shawls were the first of several coin pouches he would find snooping around the effects—likely snatched straight off of someone's belt. A quick glance inside each one revealed a small collection of silver sprinkled with a few gold pieces.

Another score for the night.

Hiccup began to shove pouches down his shirt or tie them around his wrists so that they wouldn't get lost in the ocean. He had never stolen money in his life, but if he continually made the argument in his mind that the pirates were thieves too, and he was just reversing providence, he didn't feel as guilty.

Or, at the very least, he didn't feel as guilty for not feeling guilty.

The excitement was back—or the anxiety, he had yet to place the prickling in his gut—and it gave him the needed jolt to get his butt into gear. He knew he had to get out of there before he pushed his luck too far.

He briskly walked to the door; presence of the money pouches felt heavy, adding to the weight of his many-layered clothing. His legs felt jittery, like he could break into a run at any second, and he fought to keep control of his body.

He stopped just before reaching the door. There was something... something he overlooked. Back in Berk, he used to keep anything of real importance to him under his pillow—like his book of sketches. He was the only one who lay on his bed, after all...

The door, just an arm's reach away, beckoned him to continue his escape. He looked over his shoulder, back at the pillow. Dented, stained, and unassuming.

It would be stupid to get caught this far in, just to waste time on a whim.

It would be equally stupid for him to come this far and possibly pass up something really good. And
because of what? Fear? He spent far too long feeling afraid.

His mind made up, Hiccup quickly backtracked to the tousled bedding, grabbed the pillow and yanked it up.

And there was, indeed, something. Two somethings. The first was a dagger, a simple blade and with a metal, nondescript handle, most likely used for protection or threats; Hiccup could practically see the invisible bloodstains coating the pirate's knife.

The second object was a cheap, brown pouch so small and unpretentious he almost felt disappointed. Frowning, Hiccup lifted the bag and glanced inside.

Four, cut rubies glimmered back at him.

"Oi!"

Hiccup gasped, almost dropping his contraband.

His shock over finding actual rubies must have momentarily deafened him, because Hiccup couldn't see how else he wouldn't have noticed a huge, outraged pirate standing in the doorway.

Bellowing like a troll after socks, the man charged. Hiccup didn't take in details—he only saw a seven-foot beast of a man barreling towards him.

The teen wasted no time in sprinting to the nearest window. His mind felt blank, on autopilot.

With three, unoccupied fingers, he fumbled for the latch—not the way he would have preferred to exit, but one couldn't be too picky when one had a hulking cutthroat tromping towards him looking ready to kill.

The lock released—not a second too soon—and Hiccup threw himself against the glass. Meaty and murderous hands swiped at him just as the windowpane gave in to his weight.

A furious howl followed Hiccup for the duration of his fall, ending as he plunged into freezing saline
waves. Hiccup resurfaced seconds later. Air overfilled his lungs in his shock at the absolute glacial sea temperature. He tasted salt and ice and panic. He had been in cold water before—living in Berk made it impossible to escape—but never at night, never when the heat from the sun had been absent for hours.

It hurt to breath, the bones of his ribs too frozen to expand for his lungs, and for a single, horrifying moment, Hiccup thought his legs would be too numb to keep him afloat. The layers of clothing, weighed further by the pouches of valuables, dragged him down. His arms were of no use; trying to keep hold of everything he had grabbed—the map, the rubies—

And then much of the deplorable weight was gone.

Something large, smooth and alive moved beneath him, rising up just so that he could settle atop a leather saddle. Hiccup could barely make out the outline of a reptilian head breach the dark water close to his torso.

"T-th-toothless," Hiccup gasped. He had never been happier to see his friend. He felt a similar vibe returned.

_Nice exit, but this wasn't where we agreed to meet._

Toothless gave his infamous smile and shot forward, tail swishing side to side, short, but powerful legs pumping, wings tightly molded to his body, moving smoothly towards the nearest landmass.

"P-perfect, t-t-timing buddy," Hiccup said with untold affection. He scratched the dragon's head with white, shaking fingers.

The shouting on the ship could be heard clearly; it polluted the calm night air much like the billows of smoke arising from the bow.

Hiccup and Toothless were safe from the limited reach of candles and lanterns, heading full speed toward the craggy coastline. Hiccup strongly suspected that the pirates thought he was still floundering by the ship's hull.

"S-s-sorry I'm not b-being much help," he murmured. His legs felt warm in the water, much warmer than his top-half, which was exposed to the advancing air. He leaned forward to press closer to his dragon and curled into himself. While soaked, the cloaks did their job of protecting him from the wind.

_You did your part. I'll handle it from here._

Toothless' indistinct reply came out as a moan. He worried for his human and began to use his wings in an effort to speed his swimming. Hiccup couldn't shoot fire. Hiccup didn't have a sulfurous, burning chamber within his cavity to act as a furnace. It occurred to the dragon how dangerous things could get if the boy didn't get warm soon.

So why had the fool suggested escaping through the water?

Then it hit Toothless like a second bola contraption.

_Hiccup was trying to protect him. Because he couldn't fly on his own, and he was safe from pirates as long as he was off the boat._

"M'fine," Hiccup said, automatically. His eyes were closed, looking as though he had fallen asleep. The trip to shore was both long and short; Hiccup was unsure of how much time had passed. With a
numb body, his mind went into overdrive—processing what he just did, rolling his actions over again and again, wondering if it was the best course of action. Or the right one.

Before long Hiccup's weight came back to him and Toothless was galloping ashore to leave heavy paw-prints in the sand. Hiccup clumsily climbed down from the saddle with sluggish movements and mumbled another thanks. He immediately began to throw everything from his person with careless abandon—the cloaks, the sacks of money, the saturated map, the pillow find...

He observed the score before him, the power of his actions finally making some sense.

Yes, he had snuck onto a pirate ship. Yes, he chose to do something dangerous—something planned, but dangerous, and far too left for chance—over something honest and safe and time-consuming. And yes, he did just jump out of a captured ship's window.

But it had paid off.

A slow smile blossomed on his face and he turned back to the sea, spotting the distantly lighted pirate ship. He looked at the ship, and then at the pile of goods, and then back at the ship, his smile growing, his earlier exhilaration resurfacing.

"Yes!"

Goosebumps overtook his skin. He was soaking wet, shivering, but now shaking from laugher as well.

"What a haul!" Hiccup continued to crow. His voice was loud and sharp against the darkness. He felt a similar state of livelihood he usually found from performing sharp dives and dangerous turns on Toothless.

Toothless looked at the human, amused but happy to see such energy from the teen in his state. The dragon began shuffling around in the dark, dragging washed up branches and dried out seaweed to a good area of solid footing.

Hiccup paid him no mind. He was too busy jumping up and down around his pile of treasure, pumping his blood and relieving the restlessness built from the successful steal. Maybe this is why Camicazi did it so much? The rush!

"W-we'll be set f-f-for months! M-months, Toothless!"

Toothless began to stack his finds in a haphazard pile, looking nothing like the neat, conical shapes that Hiccup would construct.

I don't need monetary valuables to survive, no matter what your legends say.

Hiccup didn't appear to be paying attention to Toothless' rumbled input. He continued his jumping, goofy smile on his face.

"I could rede-design your tail-fin—m-make it better! I c-could get nn-new c-clothes!"

If Toothless had eyebrows they would have risen with misgivings. Sure, Hiccup was getting bigger, but there was no rush in getting him fitted with the odd, removable soft-scales.

"I n-need darker clothes to match your sc-scales," Hiccup explained. "We'll be l-less l-l-likely to be spo-spotted."
Speaking of which...

Toothless spit a small flame at his makeshift fire-holder. It ignited, of course, and once lit actually looked quite similar to the one's Hiccup would make. He felt proud of his accomplishment.

The sudden appearance of a campfire caught Hiccup off-guard, as though he hadn't realized what Toothless was up to until then.

"Wow...th-thanks Toothless...that's p-pretty good!"

Stupid, silly mammal, don't just stand there!

Feeling particularly parental and exasperated with the boy who seemed unwilling to help himself, Toothless nudged Hiccup towards the fire. He spent enough time with the human to know a wet-cloth covering would hinder his ability to warm, so Toothless continued to pull at the tunic until Hiccup swatted him away.

"I'm going, I'm g-going," Hiccup said with good humor. He un buckled his belt, taking longer than normal with unfeeling fingers, and began to pull off his clothing piece by piece. Unfortunately, he used most of his garments to keep warm for his "mission" and only had an extra, grey tunic to throw over his still-damp leggings.

He should have at least lain out his pile of wet clothes to dry, but Hiccup couldn't seem to tear himself away from the warm pull of the fire. He crouched down and held his hands out by the flames until the tingling passed and the heat set in.

Toothless settled behind him, just within the heat-range of the fire.

Hiccup immediate set his newly mobile fingers to work on removing the wet saddle from Toothless's back; wet leather was never comfortable.

Toothless allowed Hiccup this task, but when the boy made to set the saddle down further away from the fire, the dragon knocked him back with his tail, sending the saddle into the sand in a haphazard pile of leather and buckles.

"Ugh, what was that for?" Hiccup grumbled, rubbing his stomach. All Toothless saw was a body that still shivered.

Stay.

Green, wide-pupiled eyes focused on the pale pallor of Hiccup's skin, the sickly shade he had been trying to get rid of since Hiccup fell into the sea.

Hiccup conceded that moving away from the fire was the last thing he really wanted. He settled between the dragon and the fire, receiving two sources of relief from either side.

"Fine. And...thank you. For this," he gestured to the fire. "And for getting us out of the water. I think I overestimated my ability to stand the cold."

Toothless snorted his agreement.

Was it worth it?

Hiccup leaned against the heated scales, feeling warm all over.

"It was worth it."
"You want what now?" The English town of Hartlepool's blacksmith stared at the foreigner as though the boy were daft.

Hiccup was used to such stares. He stared back, jaw set.

It was in his luck that he finally found a smith who actually spoke Norse. His English was bad at best; he could get past formalities and introductions, but asking for what he needed in a broken language was well nigh impossible. His Gaelic was even worse.

Even then, it appeared what he needed couldn't be conveyed through language.

His idea was valid; string would wear but metal would hold. Line it with leather and it would be more durable and comfortable for Toothless. The notion was sound...in his mind.

Technically, he had the mental vision of how to do it—short, cylinder rods bolted together with enough mobility to create snake-like movements, and wrapped in a leather casing. Simple.

He tried to tell the man as much.

"I'm not sure if I can do that, laddie," the local blacksmith said, scratching at his bald head. Hiccup didn't know if it was a smith thing or not, but this man kept his head shaved much like Gobber had. He sported a beard as well, only dark and bristly and trimmed short rather than braided. The man stood tall and barrel-chested to cut an imposing figure. A gut hung over his trousers but the bare arms were powerfully muscled. His skin had the shiny, soot-sullied appearance of a day spent working in heat and ash.

"I can do it," Hiccup said before he could stop himself. The words sort of popped out before his brain could 'okay' them.

The man stared at him and Hiccup hurried to explain himself.

"Er—I'm a blacksmith. Apprentice. "I'll do some work for you if you'll let me."

He was on a roll with the 'not checking with his brain first' thing. He was a foreigner, and he was crazy. This guy had no reason to let him work in his forge.

"I'm good with detailing," Hiccup tried anyway when the blacksmith's face didn't change. He held out his hands as though to help prove his worth.

The man observed the appendages on display. Long and lean, obviously nimble, but padded with calluses from years of forge-work. It was the only sign that the kid had ever worked in a smithy. Otherwise, he looked downright gangly.

He also looked pathetically pleading.

"I'll tell ya' what. You do three days of work for me first, and then I'll give ya three days to make what ya' want. But ya' still have to pay for the materials!" he added at the boy's overjoyed expression. "The work you do beforehand is to pay for using my forge in the first place."

Hiccup's delight didn't falter at the demand; he expected as much.
"Thank you so much!"

"Yeah, yeah," the man waved off gruffly. The happy-dopey face unsettled him. "How soon can ya' start?"

"Now!"

The man sighed. "Fine, fine, ya' nutter. I have a sword that could use some refinement; a local nobleman wants it done for his son's sixteenth birthday."

"Great!" Something Hiccup could handle. Excellent. As long as he wasn't expected to start swinging around mallets to test for durability he'd be fine. In less than a week he'd have Toothless's saddle refurbished and they'd be on their way.

To where? Who knows. That was the beauty of their freedom.

"Oh, right," Hiccup said. "Do you have a tanner around here?"

He might as well reinforce the tail-fin while he was at it.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: As a Viking I've given Hiccup a good understanding of nautical terminology :)


Rumored

Chapter Summary

The Bogs arrive in Berk for their annual trade only to find tensions high. A fight breaks out among teens and Stoick is left to lament.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rumored

The Bogs sailed two more months since their stopover in the Orkney Islands, making their annual and final stop at Berk and leaving just enough time to complete winter preparations in their home village. Only four ships moored in Hooligan Harbor, packed with enough goods to yield a fruitful trade; the rest returned home.

As per custom, Big-Boobied Bertha was the first to step off the ship, square-shouldered and round-bottomed. The usual choice crowd stood on the dock to greet her.

"Ah, Stoick, I see you haven' changed a bit. 'Cept that pouch ya carryin' around in ya middle, there," Bertha greeted, following up with a booming laugh.

"Bertha," Stoick replied gruffly. They gripped each other's forearm with strength to test the durability of their bones. Bertha observed the few men behind Stoick, recognizing the usual pack save one.

"Where's yer boy? I got Cami 'round here somewhere—Oi, Camicazi, git out here—Freya above, I can't keep her in my sight fer a mo'...

Bertha trailed off when she noticed the grim expressions sent her way. She drew the most obvious conclusion.

"He's not...was he...?"

In all honestly, it was a miracle the boy survived for as long as he had with the frequent dragon raids. Many of the outside tribes had been waiting for word when Stoick's boy would finally meet his end.

A tense silence passed and then: "Outlawed."

It came from the party of Hooligans standing behind Stoick and sounded more like a cough.

Bertha's eyebrows rose. Outlaw could be considered a fate worse than death by most—even Lesser Outlaw, especially for someone of Hiccup's stature. At least if Hiccup died in battle it could be considered an honorable death. There was no honor left when someone died in exile.

"Banished, huh? Can't say I'm surprised," Bertha commented without much sympathy. "Always thought somethin' was funny about that boy. Just wasn't right."

At least her undersized child could hold her own, for which she thanked Odin everyday.
The men flanking Stoick's side each looked alarmed at the statement. It was an unspoken taboo to mention Stoick's former son.

But Stoick showed no signs of rage or discomfort. He didn't show much of any emotion. He was, for lack of a better word, stoic.

No one could see how desperately Stoick wished that Gobber wasn't tied up with the shop after the loss of his apprentice; he could have used his best friend by his side, as he undoubtedly would be expected to recount his most painful memory to their company.

Camicazi popped out from behind her mother's wide-set hips. None of the adults had noticed her presence beforehand.

"Hiccup's gone?" she gasped.

"Aye. He left," Stoick said with in an even voice. "Betrayed us for the dragons."

"He..." For once, Camicazi didn't know what to say. She had just seen him naught two months ago. Sure he had been acting a bit weird… and she thought it a little suspect that he had been on his own… But not once did he let on that he was outlawed of all things.

The girl struggled to find the right words, her confusion bared across her features, staring between the towering adults as though they were responsible for Hiccup's absence.

"Ah, ya' liked him, didn't ya' lass?" Bertha said, sounding as though she were trying to be considerate. "You'll be better off without him in the end."

Camicazi scowled at her mother.

A muscle in Stoick's jaw twitched, but otherwise he kept his composure. The Bog-Burglars were well-traveled gossipers—hardly much different than gypsies, in his opinion—and by this time next year all the lands should know of the Viking boy who sided with the dragons.

Dealing with the open gossip about his son in the first few days after his exile had been hard, and Stoick eventually silenced the talk with angry stares and threats, thinking it would make his transition into a child-less life easier. But the whispers that followed had been even harder to bear. No one would say anything outright anymore, but the allegations only seemed to grow worse.

First there was talk of Hiccup being cursed by Loki, that the Gods chose a scapegoat to punish the village for some past trespasses.

Then came the talk of a spy planted by the dragons; that Hiccup's weak mind had been overpowered by magic, that he'd been passing the secrets on to the beasts.

And finally, the worst: talk of Valka being unfaithful on one of her voyages. After all, how could someone like Hiccup the Useless be of Stoick's brood? The woman had clearly lain with someone of a lesser status. A Saxon, or a Roman, perhaps.

No one seemed willing to put any of the blame on Stoick. The entire village loved their chief, preferring to lay blame on the other half of Hiccup's blood, and it took all of Stoick's self control not to unleash his fury on the next unsuspecting citizen who looked at him with pity.

Surely the theories would reach the Bog-Burglars, and within two seasons his wife's good name would be tarnished across the Barbaric Archipelagoes.
Anger bubbled beneath the braided beard and the spiked armor. Deep within his breast churned a hate Stoick fought daily to keep at bay. Hatred for the dragons, hatred for the village, and hatred for his son. His former son. That hatred felt like a double-headed spear, half stuck in his own gut.

Stoick's burbling wrath was put to a halt when the tiny, black-clad blonde whirled on the spot, her long hair flying behind her, and marched back up the plank with purpose.

"I'm going back on the ship!" she announced loudly. The girl may not have had her mother's figure, but she certainly inherited the boisterous woman's voice.

"Camicazi!" Bertha snapped. "That is no way to behave toward our hosts!"

"I don't care! This is going to be so lame without Hiccup."

She left the group of Vikings to stare after her.

"Kids. Gettin' so uppity these days," Spitelout muttered. "Never acted like that in my day."

Camicazi said those words to cut the adults; she couldn't stand the way her mother spoke of Hiccup's absence as though it were a blessing in disguise.

She imagined how true they'd prove to be.

The trade with Berk wasn't the same without Hiccup. Sure, Camicazi could get along with the other kids around her age (and by get along she meant besting them in bladed battles). But beating everyone got old after a while—there were only so many opponents one could find on an island—and she missed the dry humor and witty banter the chief's son would provide. She could think of crazy schemes, but Hiccup could always think of crazier.

Like his latest scheme: the craziest of them all. And he hadn't even let her in on it.

It didn't take long for the Bog-Burglars to find out the details behind the heir of Berk's outlawry. Because it was so taboo, everyone was willing to whisper about it behind closed doors. When Camicazi first found out Hiccup had sided with the dragons, riding off on the back of a Night Fury, she had been furious.

He had his moment to tell her—it was just the two of them on the island, right before her mother came calling—and he said nothing. They weren't the best of friends in their limited time together, but they shared camaraderie, and she figured she was at least entitled to Hiccup's confidence. Had the dragon been mere feet behind him at the time? Was she, unknowingly, a step or two away from the most elusive of dragons?

She'd never know. She'd probably never see Hiccup again.

They were due to stay at least two more days before heading home to sit out the winter, and, to Camicazi, time couldn't move slower. If she wasn't hiding out on one of her ships, practicing her swordsmanship, she was with the other kids her age. And none of them were very helpful in figuring out the reasoning behind Hiccup's actions.

The main problem was that no one really knew Hiccup, not even his own father, so no one saw it
coming. Snotlout clearly didn't have a close relationship with his cousin and Hiccup's only childhood friend, Fishlegs, had drifted away when it became apparent he'd have to choose between Hiccup and the "in-crowd".

The twins mostly viewed Hiccup as good victim material, targeting him in a number of their pranks as children, but warmed to him at his sheer daring as of late. They would, at times, act as though they were envious of Hiccup. Camicazi found she could relate to them the easiest.

On the other hand, that Astrid girl was rather terse and didn't hold back her concrete dislike of Hiccup.

…Such as in the current moment, as Camicazi and Fishlegs began conversing on the tactical advantage of using a dragon in battle.

"They can move much faster than Vikings," Fishlegs said. "A Gronkle may have speed four, but something like a Night Fury would have to be at least eighteen. Maybe more!"

Camicazi's mind focused more on the actual battling aspects. "Ohhh, what if the dragon shot something with fire, and then you'd follow up by stabbing it. It's like insurance to make sure your victim's dead! I've never stabbed something that's already burning before..."

"A dragon only belongs on one side of a Viking's blade," Astrid said when she couldn't hold her tongue any more. She sounded rather assured, and no one had to ask which side of the blade she referred to.

"Well, no one's ever tried the other side—besides Hiccup, that is..." Fishlegs faltered at the scathing look Astrid sent his way. "I-I mean, there are bonuses to consider. An aerial attack could give the element of surprise—"

"Against who?" Astrid cut in. Knowing she had everyone's attention, she met the eye of every teen present. "Against us!"

"Hiccup'll be back," Camicazi said flippantly. She picked at some dirt under her fingernail with one of her smaller daggers. "You can ask him then what side he's on."

"I hope he lets us ride the dragon," Tuffnut said brightly. His sister's smirk widened into an eager grin.

Astrid looked at the pair in disgust. She felt like she spoke only to herself at times.

"If he comes back we kill him. It's what we do to outlaws," she stated, flipping her new axe over her shoulder. It teetered a bit, not as balanced or practiced as her old axe, but she would get used to it in time.

For a moment no one said anything...

Up until now it had been deriding Hiccup's failure to embrace the Viking Way and scoffing at his floundering attempts to fit in only to turn tail and join the dragons. But no one—no one—spoke of what would be done to him should he show his face again in the next three years. No one expected him to return. Everyone assumed the memory of Stoick the Vast's failure of a son would fade with the passing seasons. That, in the end, he would only amount to a black mark on Berk's otherwise outstanding history.

"Uh, yeah..." Snotlout said, sounding more unnerved than certain.
He practically had the chieftainship in the bag, and while the slim chance Hiccup would return and try and reclaim his title existed, Snotlout had no burning desire to see Hiccup destroyed. Not like Astrid did. He couldn't understand Astrid's continuous hatred of his ex-cousin, even weeks after the departure. Sometimes he took advantage of her aggressive attitude to give them a common ground against weaklings. Other times, such as now, her intensity frightened him.

"No one is going to kill Hiccup," Camicazi said with an inexplicable need to defend a man who couldn't defend himself. "Right Fishy?"

Fishlegs looked pained. Deep down he wanted to agree; he knew if faced with the challenge he would not be able to take Hiccup's life. And yet, he couldn't bring himself to disagree with his friends. His acceptance in their group was based on his blessed size and his willingness to do as told. He kept his eyes to his duck-footed stance and said nothing.

"Not before I get a ride, anyway," Ruffnut declared under her breath. It was loud enough for Astrid to catch. The unbending girl sent Ruffnut a severe glower before focusing on Camicazi.

Up until now, Camicazi felt she managed to stay neutral with regard to how the other kids viewed her. She knew she just earned a spot in Astrid's bad book.

"Look, pipsqueak," Astrid began, sounding, for the all world, like she was trying to mimic a war general. "Whatever betrothal arrangements your parents may have made with the chief are canceled. Standing up for Hiccup isn't going to get you into any sort of position here so you need to quit while you're ahead. He made his choice and you'd do well not defend him. Especially around here"

Oh no, she didn't.

Tuffnut guffawed loudly, slapping an "oooooh"-ing Snotlout on the shoulder.

"Can you imagine the kids?" Tuffnut crowed. "They'd be midgets—ugh!"

The broad side of a sword knocked him clean off his feet and onto the hardened dirt. Tuffnut immediately flailed on his back, rolling back and forth, clutching his face and moaning of his pain. Camicazi kept her grip on the handle of her weapon as she stormed up to Astrid.

"Let's get one thing straight you butch, sheep-brained, shrew!" Fishlegs gasped, Ruffnut looked elated and Snotlout's jaw dropped. Camicazi only came up to the other girl's nose, but she felt such indignation in that moment that she hardly cared.

"I am not, nor have I ever been, engaged to Hiccup! I am not a social climber and, unlike some people, I don't need to be. I was born into privilege! I am superior to you in status and in skill, and if I say Hiccup isn't going to be killed by the likes of you, then he won't!"

Tuffnut sat up, a huge red welt visible on his left cheek and all of his attention on conflict before him.

Astrid had never been talked down to before by someone of her age, and certainly not by someone smaller than her. The little outsider stared back, defiance bright in her eyes. Camicazi thoroughly believed the words she spoke and Astrid felt another shift in her universe—the same feeling she got when Hiccup began besting her in dragon training. This wasn't right, this wasn't to her plan, and this wasn't to be stood for.

"You and me, in the arena. Now."

Camicazi bared her teeth.
"Gladly."

Stoick nursed his tankard of mead. It might have been his fifth or sixth of the night, he hadn't been keeping track.

The hour was late; most of the village was asleep or in the mead hall. Normally Stoick would be in the mead hall with the rowdiest of their guests, but after nearly a week of playing host, keeping up his strong façade, he needed a moment to himself. He sat on a rock ledge constructed next to his house and overlooked the village, taking in everything from Gobber's hillside shop down to the Thatcher's coastal lean-to. He could even count the tiny, bobbing lights on the Bog-Burglars' ship windows, had he wanted.

Their guests would be leaving tomorrow. They would have stayed longer, but after the fight broke out both Stoick and Bertha decided the recent (or not-so-recent) scandal with the chief's son left too negative of an atmosphere.

The fight...that had come as a shock to everybody. The girls were separated before any clear winner could be determined, but each gave the other a sound beating. Camicazi, Stoick knew to taunt and tease as she fought, but to see the normally composed Hofferson lass spitting out her own set of insults threw many for a loop. Stoick almost lost a good chunk of his beard when he tried to pull her back. He gave the pair a stern berating about inter-village relations and tolerance of different cultures, but left the actual disciplining to the parents.

And the subject of their fight—Hiccup—had struck him harder than he expected. The boy caused trouble even in absence.

Stoick couldn't understand it. He and Valka were the cream of the crop; any child of theirs was meant to be the perfect Viking: strong, powerful, capable, and elite. Instead, Valka was taken before they could have any other kids. Instead, their only child questioned tradition and seemed incapable of putting on weight. Instead, their only child chose their mortal enemy over his own people...

"Nothin's turned out as it should," he muttered, staring beyond the rim at his murky reflection, concentric ripples distorting the face that stared gloomily back at him.

"According to whom?"

Stoick jolted at the voice by his elbow. Somehow, the village Elder managed to sneak up on him, creaky bones and all. The small woman seated herself next to the mammoth of a man without prompt.

Stoick stared at her as she did. The woman rarely spoke, and when she did it was calculated. Only to one person at a time, and in moments of privacy. A piece of his despair ebbed.

"You seem to be in a right state these days," she commented, her eyes on the sky, rather than the village.

He wasn't surprised she could see past his closed off visage. She hadn't become the Elder through age alone.

"Well what would you expect? After everything that's happened… Everything's so… It's all so
messed up..." He shifted his helmet to tuck back flyaway red hairs before replacing it atop his head.

"I'd expect you to remember the warnings laid clear in your past," the Elder replied.

Stoick snorted.

"What I remember is marrying the most beautiful, talented Viking woman in the world. I remember taking over the chieftain duties with pride. I did everything right, like I was supposed to. I had everything!" he swept a hand across their view of the village. "The best possible life lain out before me 'n' then... then, one by one, everything just fell apart... Valka...'n' now Hiccup..."

He could feel the Elder observe him with her shrewd stare, but Stoick kept his own on the village, trying desperately to find some good out there. Anything that could pull him off this destructive pattern of thinking.

"Do you remember what I told you when Hiccup was born?" the Elder asked.

Stoick blinked at her with slightly bloodshot eyes.

"Er, yeah...yeah I do," he said softly, thinking back to the words. "Yeh picked him up, he was so small 'n' sickly, 'n' said, 'this boy—"

"—‘is not a Viking,’" the Elder cut in. "And I stand by what I said."

Stoick stared, unseeing, at the teetering docks. The night was so clear, so calm, that the old, creaking boards could be heard from their seats.

He did remember. Oh how he remembered. It was the first time he felt such rage towards the Elder—when she held the product of his and Valka's union and uttered such an outrageous prediction.

"How did you know?" he asked, his voice gone hoarse. "How did you know, even then, that he would..." he paused, and took a breath. "I tried to make a Viking out of him. I tried to encourage the right sort of things 'n' put a stop to his constant... questioning and the... the whimsical fantasying..."

The Elder shook her head. "The gods had other plans for him. Your efforts were always futile."

"Plans?" Stoick scoffed. "The gods have no need for someone like him."

A thin, white eyebrow cocked in his direction.

"Do you really think so?" Wrinkled lips stretched into a smile. "I, Stoick Warmonger Haddock, am the medium here, not you. You are the man who needs to have a little more faith. In everything."

She tipped back her tankard and took a healthy gulp of the liquid within. Stoick only then noticed the Elder had brought her own supply of mead.

The woman straightened out and smacked her lips.

"I know that look... You don't want to challenge me to a drinking contest, young man. I've got a good many years over you of tolerance conditioning."

For the first time in months, Stoick laughed.
No Hiccup or Toothless in this chapter, but plenty for the next one. There will not be any "good" or "bad" guys in this story; everyone's going to have their ups and downs.
Out in the wilderness, Toothless learns that he needs to break Hiccup of some bad habits. Hiccup gets a very unexpected visitor in a very unexpected way.

Hiccup's breath came in short, shallow pants. A stitch had formed in his side at least half a mile back and the back of his left ankle twinged with every step.

"C-come on—! I'm—sorry—!" he pleaded to his thundering pursuer. He shifted his heel in the dirt with the next stride and made an abrupt change in direction. A massive paw swiped air where his head was moments before.

"I didn't know you were going to eat it! The meat was just there!"

Hiccup dived under a cluster of low hanging branches where his stature worked to his advantage. Unfortunately the thickness of the branches wasn't enough to stand up to the fireball—and subsequent body—that crashed through seconds later.

"You already ate most of the carcass anyway!"

Hiccup sensed the heat approaching and ducked just in time to avoid the fire sailing over his head.

"Thor's hairy—ack!"

His attempted defense cost him his footing in a rabbit hole. He stumbled, just managing to get his weight back under him before a huge force slammed him to the ground.

Hiccup moaned and coughed. "Toothless...I can't...breathe...!"
The dragon shifted its weight so only his forelegs were draped across the boy's torso.

"Better," Hiccup sighed, still trying to catch his breath. "But... really... I... really didn't know... you were going to... ha... eat that part. It was just... there! Calling to me..."

Toothless snorted. The hot air washed over Hiccup's face. The boy grimaced.

_I know. I'm just getting you into shape._

"Hey! I'm fast enough! Look how long it took you to catch me!"

_I still caught you._

"It took a rabbit hole for you to win."

Toothless favored Hiccup with a long, wet lick up the side of his face. His tongue was smoother than a human's, much like a dog's: extra slippery and extra slobbery.

"Ugh, gross! Get off! Come on..." Hiccup laughed, pushing Toothless' face away with both hands. Toothless stood and backed off, allowing the human to pull himself onto unsteady feet.

"Oof..." Hiccup's hand came up to rub the bottom half of his ribs. "I think you might have cracked a rib," he complained.

Toothless crooned and bumped Hiccup in the side with his head as they began to make their way back to camp.

_Then consider this stamina training._

Hiccup winced at the touch, pushing at the scaled brow. "You're so mean to me."

Toothless gave his signature gummy smile.
What doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

Hiccup shook his head, smiling widely, and hopped up on Toothless's saddle with skilled ease.

"Let's fly back, you big bully. It's dark enough out."

Twilight had approached during their romp across the Wessex countryside, making the duo appear nothing more than a dark shadow against the dim sky—passable as a figment the imagination.

Though tired from unexpected run, Hiccup always had energy to perform a few acrobatics in the air. He tested the maneuverability of the upgraded foot workings, pulling off sharp spins and suspended loops. Though more durable, the fixings now needed to be oiled from time to time to keep from squeaking. Hiccup also feared the balance of weight would be altered, and had been brainstorming on ways to evenly burden the other side of the saddle.

Their fly back to camp took just as long as the run away from him. Neither male could seem to help himself once up in the air; the natural, euphoric feeling that flight brought proved a hard thing to pull from.

Eventually they slowed above the general area of camp and Hiccup squinted against the darkness until he found their exact location.

As soon as Hiccup dismounted, Toothless shook his muscles loose and waited for his human removed the saddle. Once free, the dragon heated the earth with his fire, kneading the residual sparks into the ground, before settling onto his warm bed.

Hiccup narrowed his eyes with envy; he had been trying to unbuckle his flying-harness, but his fingers moved slower than usual, his blood prioritized with warming his heart warm. It came loose after some fumbling and he tossed it on his woven pack, filled to the brim with the rest of his belongings.

"Looks like winter's going to catch us before we can escape it," Hiccup said, rubbing his numb fingers together.

Toothless, couchant, cocked his head as if to say, 'that's what you get for being frail, mammal'.

The fire Hiccup started for their dinner had been reduced to a crackling pile of glowing cinders in their absence. Hiccup stuck out his bottom lip as he observed the dismal source of heat.

"Guess I gotta get some more wood," he sighed. He looked at Toothless' warm bed one last time, longing to curl up next to his friend and sleep. But he knew from experience that he would wake up halfway through the night needing another spring of warmth.

There was no helping it.

"I'll be back," he called behind him. "Probably."

And I'll be here. Definitely.

Hiccup grabbed the long, black cloak before heading off; it would give him a little extra protection against the cold and help avoid detection from predators. He moved through the trees with a learned silence, picking up good candidates for burning along the way. Every third or fourth hunt, Toothless would push Hiccup to bring in the kill. Hiccup would try to mimic 'Toothless' movements in hunting; toe-heel steps, knowing where brittle twigs and leaves lay, moving with the wind and the sounds of nature. If a creature ten times his size could move silently through a forest, then he had no excuse.
And with his only weapon as a dagger (he refused to use Astrid's axe, even though he still kept it with him) he had no choice but to improve his knife-throwing abilities. Injuring an animal with an inadequate throw and then having to kill it up close was not a routine he liked to repeat.

A soft hissing noise sounded above his right ear. Hiccup sprang forward and turned. He sucked in his breath and stared at the motionless leaves hanging from the tree. For a moment nothing emerged, and he was willing to chalk it up to his imagination.

His shoulders sagged, relieved of their tension, and he strengthened his hold on the branches he had collected.

"This is good," he muttered. He was more than ready to get back to Toothless. They performed their usual circling of the area several times to make sure no humans would stumble upon them, but creatures of any other sort remained an unknown to him with his human senses.

Hiccup took a single step forward towards the camp. The hissing came again, and with it a body fell from the trees, hitting the ground with a light thud and rearing up on its only two legs.

Hiccup jumped back with a cry that sounded far too loud to his ears.

The creature hissed at him. Hiccup fought the urge to pull out his dagger. It could have been a subspecies of dragons for all he knew. In many ways it had the appearance of a miniature, green nightmare, stretching only about three feet long from tail to nose, with two stubby hind legs and clawed wings for arms. Miniature, Nightmare-like horns adorned its head. Hiccup found its appearance disquieting.

Rather than put up any reasonable defense, Hiccup took a breath, willing calmness over his heart, rearranged the wood under one arm and held his free hand out in front of him in a placating manner.

"It's okay," he cooed. "I'm not going to hurt you."

It hissed again, its long, forked tongue snaking far beyond its jaws. The eyes gleamed yellow, cutting through the darkness with pupils so slit they might not have been there at all.

Hiccup moved back, still with his hand out, one step at a time.

A louder, deeper hissing reverberated behind him. Hot breath leavened his hair.

Hiccup sprung away with a shriek—manly, of course—and managed to keep hold of the firewood by the edge of his fingertips. Another of the strange dragon had appeared from a dry bush, this one browner in color and looked to be as long as Hiccup was tall.

"Oh crap," Hiccup breathed. He began to rethink his pacifist approach as the larger reptile slithered toward him, keeping low to the ground. A complete mouth of serrated teeth gleamed up at him with the last the sun's light offered.

He slowly moved his hand towards his belt—his dagger—as he retreated. He increasingly became more aware of the movement occurring before and around him. There were more of them, more of this strange creature, and one by one they materialized from under ferns and over tree branches.

Hiccup closed his hand on the handle of his knife. He didn't want to attack; he wanted to reach them like he reached Toothless.

The largest of the lot coiled, and Hiccup braced himself with slightly bent knees and a discreet, but firm hold of his weapon. He would have to drop the firewood, of course, when the time came to
defend himself, and that errant thought nettled him. He felt calling for Toothless would provoke them into prematurely attacking; he felt any sudden movement on his part would result in his immediate death. If he could just get close enough to camp, then maybe Toothless would smell something was up...

The apparent ringleader of the little dragons gave another hiss—it bordered on a roar.

"Just… calm down. I'm leaving," Hiccup said as evenly as he could.

Either it didn't like his voice or it didn't believe him, because the dragon reared back, spreading its wings.

"Please don't make me hurt you," he begged. He left civilization for dragons—or a dragon at any rate. He couldn't die by them.

Hiccup twitched part of the blade from his belt, prepared to swing forward, and the movement set the creatures in motion. He dropped the sticks and swung the weapon outward.

Before the blade touched scales a black blur shot in front of him, and the closest dragon was caught within a set of powerful jaws.

Toothless crunched down on the smaller creature with crushing force before tossing it to the side, ready to receive the onslaught of attackers. Shrieks filled the air; hissing, clawing reptiles descended from all sides of the Night Fury. Toothless was fast and precise in his defense—no movement wasted; every claw swipe struck true, every chomp latched onto prey, and every tail swing bludgeoned the dragons into solid tree trunks.

For the moment Hiccup could only stand and watch; the shock of Toothless' appearance rooted him into place. Sometimes, amidst the purring and the nuzzling, he forgot that—in addition to being his best friend and companion—Toothless was a dangerous and powerful and magnificent beast.

While Hiccup saw protection, everything else in that world saw the ultimate predator.

They were so far apart in abilities it wasn't even funny.

And then the little dragons began retreating back into the forest—disappearing behind leaves and roots—screeching obscenities in their language. The scuffle was brief, only taking seconds for the many creatures to realize they were outclassed and for Hiccup to gather his wits.

Toothless snorted a puff of smoke final flicker of their tails.

"Attack my human, will you?"

He spat a fireball at the motionless body of the leader and in seconds the sickly smell of burning flesh reached Hiccup's nose. The boy grimaced. The grip on his dagger relaxed.

"Thanks, Toothless," Hiccup said, voice thick with gratitude. Toothless nuzzled the underside of his chin, ruffling Hiccup's feathery hair with his breath. Hiccup, in turn, wrapped his arms around Toothless' head in an appreciative hug.

You're too trusting. I know you. I know you tried to make friends with those varmints, you foolish boy.

"Can't help it," Hiccup said, trying to laugh it off. He turned, releasing Toothless from his hold, and picked up the wood he dropped. "I guess I wanted to make some more friends."
Toothless snarled.

*Did you think they were cute, little dragons? Those were of a lesser intelligence, nothing more than rats. They wouldn't have understood you.*

"I'm sorry," Hiccup mumbled.

Toothless followed close to Hiccup for the duration of his firewood collecting. Nothing else attacked, but Hiccup kept thinking he heard phantom hissing all the way back to camp.

As soon as he got the fire up to par, Hiccup set up in his usual spot against Toothless. The gentle rising and falling of the dragon's stomach created a soothing, oceanic motion that drew Hiccup into a sense of security. He pulled out his journal from his pack and immediately began sketching out the little dragon he'd just seen. He couldn't recall ever seeing it in the dragon manual, and from his brief encounter he gathered it was a territorial pack creature.

He tried to remember if it had one talon or three on its winged fore-claw, or if the tail had any fins. That should have been the first thing he looked at...seeing how tailfins were his specialty...*ha...*

Hiccup didn't know when his coal stick slowed in its detailing, he didn't know when it trailed off the paper, leaving a lamentable, dark line. He never realized it fell out of his limp hand as slumber overtook him.

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Hiccup jolted awake, feeling unusually disoriented—like something was out of place. He was still in his campsite and the fire still burned at his feet, though flamed lower than he remembered.

The space felt empty somehow, like—

"Toothless?"

The dragon was nowhere to be found. Not behind him, or against him, or on the other side of the fire, prowling around the camp.

Hiccup sat up straighter, unnerved, and something shifted over his lap. His journal lay open, the picture of that little dragon he faced earlier sketched onto its brittle pages. Of course, he really didn't know if it was a dragon, having never seen anything like it—

"A wyvern."

Hiccup gasped as the last thing he expected to find deep within the Wessex woodlands stood over him—a young woman.

He crab-walked backward, his journal tumbling from his lap.

She stepped to follow him. An underdress of deep blue brushed the dirt, a hem decorated in an intricate gold braid concealed her feet. Torquoise brooches fastened a beige apron-skirt overtop. A multitude of decorative, amber and glass beads hung between the clasps. She appeared nothing more than a maiden Viking with her long, brown hair parted into a thick braid over each shoulder and knobbed at the end like Ruffnut's. Blue-grey eyes sparkled with amusement.
Hiccup couldn't rationalize an explanation for her sudden company and Toothless' mysterious absence other than—

"Are you Toothless?" he asked stupidly. Even as he said it he knew it was wrong. Toothless and this woman had a completely different presence.

She laughed, delicately, drawing her hand over her mouth.

"Do you think Toothless is a female?" she questioned back. Even her voice sounded surreal. Light with laughter, and warm.

Hiccup grimaced. "Thor, I hope not."

Considering how many times he'd bathed in front of the dragon.

"My name is Gudrid," she introduced herself. She took a few more steps towards him—light and silent.

"Where's Toothless?" Hiccup asked, refusing to let his guard down.

Gudrid stopped her approach when he looked ready to bolt. Instead she drew her dress up around her and settled neatly to the ground, a good couple yards away from him. Hiccup had to wonder if she was cold; she had no cloak or fur on for this chilly night.

"You have no reason to fear me," she said gently. "I am your vördr."

"My...what?" The word, while vaguely familiar to him, completely escaped his comprehension.

"Vördr," she repeated for his benefit. "Your warden."

"And... what sort of job is that?" Hiccup asked. The skepticism would not leave his tone. It was the distinct lack of Night Fury that set him off; otherwise he wouldn't have minded talking to such a pretty girl.

He was mostly sure he was taller than her too, which he liked.

The woman tisked.

"You are always the cynic, aren't you? Well, Hiccup, your soul is my responsibility. I am here to guide you into shaping your destiny." She peered at him through the veil of her dark bangs. "The Gods have a plan for you, Hiccup Haddock."

The absurdity of the statement struck Hiccup, but he sobered before he could scoff at it. He looked away, into the movement of the fire, and drew one knee to his chest.

"I'm not a Haddock."

Gudrid turned her head. "No, I suppose you're not anymore, are you?"

Hiccup glowered at her and her mouth twitched, as though she struggled to keep her face straight. Hiccup still had too much baby fat on his cheeks to genuinely pull off intimidation.

"Let us focus more on what you are, rather than what you are not," Gudrid said. Hiccup's lip curled.

"That's easy—I'm a traitor. Oh no, wait," he laughed, derisive. "I'm a coward."
Gudrid frowned.

"That is enough, Hiccup."

For a moment, Hiccup looked as though it wasn't enough, like he wanted to continue being snarky until Toothless came back. But he knew issuing an attitude wouldn't help him find the dragon faster. Where was he?

As though able to read his thoughts—and Hiccup suspected she could—Gudrid said, "Never mind where Toothless is; he is fine. I am here to speak of your choices as of late."

"Oh yeah, treachery and deception. I'm really going places—" Hiccup stopped at her disapproving look. "Uh, sorry."

"The choices you make are unique, Hiccup, not poor. You have an ability to see beyond what you know to be true, and find what really is true. You have a strong sense of morals and mercy, which, while viewed unfavorably by the People you are fostered from, matter beyond this life."

"So...I'm all set when I die?" Hiccup surmised. He sounded anything but enthused. "That's...that's great..."

Gudrid pursed her lips, perhaps realizing she could not coerce the sarcasm out of him.

"Do not separate worlds into life and death," she said. "The border between them is as wide as it is vague."

"Now, listen to me Hiccup, for you are going to need to understand some things to continue down this path."

Hiccup opened his mouth to ask—what path? What was she talking about?—but Gudrid spoke over him.

"There are bonds in this world—bonds between souls. It is what makes us truly alive. And with each bond are different magicks to tie us, and different circumstances to meet. You and Toothless have one such bond."


"You showed each other mercy. You had him, helpless, at knifepoint and chose to let him live. He had you, unarmed, under his claws and chose to let you live. And what's more, you had no reason to trust each other. No means to communicate. It's a bond of Blind Faith."

Hiccup hadn't realized his jaw lay slack until he spoke again. "Blind faith?"

"Hmm," Gudrid smiled, looking quite pretty. "And the string that ties you is known as Understanding."

Hiccup continued to stare at her, blank. Gudrid stared back.

"You haven't noticed the change over the last several weeks?" she asked.

"Change...?"

She appeared caught between exasperation and mirth.

"Do you mean to say that you haven't noticed your increased understanding of Toothless?"
Hiccup's head spun, completely taken aback. "I...well, that is, I thought...uh..."

Was this true? He couldn't remember ever hearing Toothless speak but...

Somehow, over the course of their time together... *yes*. He *could* understand him. Hiccup had attributed it to his own mind filling in the silence to match Toothless' actions when, in reality, there had been no silence.

How... How could he have not noticed?

Gudrid watched the expressions run across his face, and smiled at his exact moment of realization. Hiccup might have been more unsettled by her intimate reading of him—as though they had known each other a lifetime—but he hadn't the mind for it now.

"If you are aware of it now, it will come to your attention the next time you speak to him," Gudrid said.

Hiccup couldn't help himself. "Yeah, well, who knows when that will be since he seems to have disappeared... and you're in no hurry to clue me in!"

Rather than reproach him, Gudrid smiled again, leaning forwards to bring their faces uncomfortably close. Hiccup was startled to find she somehow came to sit right next to him in the time of their discussion.

"You will see him in just a moment," she said in that feathery, warm voice. She brought herself even closer. Their noses were practically touching. His annoyance with her vanished much as their surroundings had.

_Hiccup couldn't move, didn't think he wanted to, and the breath ghosting over his lips became a soft kiss..._

Hiccup jerked, finding himself flat-backed on the ground. Light filtered down on him in misshapen patches, one falling over his right eye with an uncomfortable sting. He scrunched his face, realizing it was a dream—a hormonal dream going by the ending.

Something large and smooth nudged at his temple, and hot air washed over his forehead in short puffs. Hiccup wasn't alarmed in the least.

"Toothless!" he cried, using a hand to push the great head away from him, a large smile fixed on his face. Even though it was a dream, Hiccup felt relieved to know Toothless was still with him.

The smile dimmed as he noticed Toothless' anxious wiggling.

"What's wrong, bud?"

::Wrong? I believed you would never wake up! Nothing I did would awaken you! I licked you! Licked you! You hate that! Nothing happened! I would have thought you dead in your sleep if it were not for your snoring!::

Hiccup's cheeks puffed.

"I do not snore!"

::Do too::

"No I—I'm not playing that game! I *don't*, and further more, I *happened* to be in the middle of a
really, really bizarre dream where there was this woman... and... and... Toothless...?"

::Yes?::

"I can understand you..."

::Yes? And?::

"No, I mean... I can really understand you! I hear what you're saying."

It was weird. So weird. The dragon's lips—or snout—weren't moving, but the words resounded, not in his head, but in the air around him. As though Toothless actually spoke aloud. They simply weren't...tangible.

Toothless was silent for a moment, and then:

::You could not always understand me?::

Hiccup shook his head.

"No. I just got a feeling of what you meant. Remember when we first met? I couldn't get anything from you. And then... then I kinda did but... I didn't think..."

Toothless moaned. ::That does make certain moments more understandable. I thought you were simply stupid::

Hiccup reeled. "Hey! You're the one who didn't realize I didn't understand you."

::Allow me consideration! You were the first human I had ever attempted to commune with::

"Right! And you were the first dragon I tried to talk to. So no... no bragging!"

Toothless snorted at him. Hiccup got the sense he was amused.

::This does explain why no other other humans would respond to us dragons. I suppose humans can only understand verbalized speak?:: At Hiccup's pleased nod, Toothless asked, ::Then how did you come to understand me?::

"Oh! Right, you'll love this—" Hiccup began, ready to fill in his friend on the vördr—whom he still didn't quite believe. He paused, noticing the neglected journal lying facedown by his knee. "But first..."

He picked it up, flipping it over to the last paged used, and above the sketch he wrote: Wyvern.

He grinned, slapping the book shut, and faced the impatient dragon. He had a feeling there was a whole other side to dragons he was about to uncover.

Chapter End Notes

**Note**

::Speak:: is, if you haven't guessed by now, Toothless's method of communication, which was inspired by Fjordmustang (read her stuff if you haven't!)
Also this is where Viking Mythology starts to come into play. It'll be an underlying theme for the most part.
Broached

Chapter Summary

Hiccup learns the reason behind the war.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Broached

They pulled another all-nighter—still concealed by the pre-dawn sky—with Hiccup adamant about making it to the southeastern coast of Wessex by first light. He wanted a full day's rest before daring to cross the English Channel. He was far more worried about it than Toothless, found Hiccup's concern more insulting than anything else.

"So how old are you?" Hiccup asked. The questions he'd come up with so far were harmless and hardly personal, like he wanted to solidify his understanding of Toothless from the ground up.

::Old?::

Hiccup encountered the communication issue before: where dragons had different phrases or methods of keeping track of things humans found important.

"How many... winters have you seen?" he tried.

A moment of silence passed before Toothless realized Hiccup was trying to measure his time spent since his hatching.

::I cannot truly say. For most of my life I had been with my drove, and we do not measure time by your seasons—::

"Wait!" Hiccup interrupted. "There are other Night Furies? ...Ah, of course there are if you exist. I mean, you can't have been the only one... Sorry! Sorry! I sound really stupid, I know. But you always seemed to be the only one that attacked the village. I guess we... we sort of built you up into some kind of singular icon..."

::Hmm. Not that I mind. It is nice to be shown appropriate reverence::

Hiccup snorted. And then coughed, having accidentally inhaled a cloud they were passing through.

There were some topics the pair hadn't gotten around to breaching. Such as the war.

It would come in time—Hiccup couldn't avoid discussing Berk forever—but Toothless found it refreshing to see Hiccup talking about the war so casually, as though they were untouched by their pasts. His human seemed more concerned with the concept of his drove.

::It is because I was the only of my kind in the region:: Toothless paused, wondering where to start.

::Let me tell you something about my drove... TatqiqKivqaq—Night Furies, as you humans have named us—are a clan of... nomads. We are periodic nomads. We have two... moments? Seasons!
We have two seasons. Like your Winters and your Summers. We refer to them as Spells: the Resting and the Roving.

::Much of our time is spent in a land at the peak of the world, where the sun does not appear for many, many moon patterns. That is our Resting spell. When the sun rises, we follow the moon until the time of No Sun returns. That is our Roving spell. My kind is apt to avoiding the light at all costs. It was not until I became separated from my drove did I learn to live under its heat::

"Wow," Hiccup uttered. Every other word failed him for the moment.

It had only been a day or so since the dream-vision, and Hiccup felt he would never overcome the awe of having such a spring of knowledge available to him. The voice he heard—deep, faltering, youthful—the words he exchanged with a dragon, were his only proof that Gurdid—that the dream—was real.

The wind slapping his face told him he wasn't dreaming now.

"So... You're migratory with the nighttime—er, were, I guess. Your seasons are different... not in years like we count. You have no way to tell how long you've been alive?"

::Coloring will mark where a dragon stands in life. For my kind, hatchlings are blue, and very bright, even when just under starlight. Fully mature adults are absent of all color...::

"Black," Hiccup supplied.

::Yes, black. The longest we spend in our life is black::

It made sense to Hiccup; humans, too, spent the majority of their life considered as "mature adults".

::When we begin to reach the extent of our time in this world, the black will fade. Those who live with faded scales are held in the highest regard::

"Human hair goes grey when they get old," Hiccup supplied aloud. He sensed 'grey' was the color Toothless referred to when he spoke of fading. "The Elder in our village is considered the wisest, and she's completely grey."

::Is human hair a good indicator of age?::

"In most cases," Hiccup conceded. "We don't start out with much when we're born and it keeps on growing from there. Then again, some people lose their hair before they lose their color." He recalled Gobber's hair receding so fast that the man started to shave his whole head.

Hiccup looked down at Toothless' scales. It was still dark out, the sun had not yet begun its rise, but he didn't need light to know they still shined with a blue tint. Did this mean Toothless was still young?

The thought pleased Hiccup; he felt more connected with his best friend, as neither were fully mature adults yet.

In other ways, it left them worlds apart. Something told Hiccup that he'd die long, long before Toothless.

::How many winters have you seen?::

Toothless' question startled him out of his funk.
"This will be my sixteenth," Hiccup said, sounding distracted. Come Þorri, he would have been considered a legal adult back in Berk. He would have the right to speak at the Løgting and lead his own hunts.

Not that those rights would have been easily exercised with his reputation.

::That is not much, is it?:: Toothless sounded as though he had tuned into Hiccup's earlier train of thought.

Hiccup shook his head, the cool wind treading through his hair like ghostly fingers, and he ran his hand down the scales on Toothless' neck. Blue-black. Still young.

"I think, compared to you, it's not."

::Since my separation from my drove, I have stayed more than sixteen winters. There was a different —chief?—yes, a different chief than your father::

Hiccup bit his lip. "So you could be older than my dad."

::And my time around your islands was not much compared to my time with my drove::: Toothless admitted.

Hiccup laughed, feeling hollow, "And you're still a little blue."

::Is something wrong?: Toothless asked out of custom more than anything else. He knew what Hiccup felt, for he felt it too: the heavy, hurtful realization of their eventual separation. Time and nature would ultimately tear them apart.

"Humans don't live that long... most only about sixty or seventy ye—er, winters. Provided something doesn't kill us first."

::I won't survive long without you:::

Hiccup had to smile. He leaned forward and rested his weight over crossed arms atop Toothless' head. His heel flicked into a new position as the winds changed and they continued to glide smoothly below the clouds.

"I thought you said your tailfin would grow back in time? Shouldn't fifty years be enough?"

One of the first things he asked Toothless was if his tail still hurt. The answer was 'no'. Toothless informed him that, while dragons could regenerate, it was a lengthy process. A downed dragon would never survive long enough when it came to restoring their flight.

Thanks to Hiccup, Toothless could be the exception.

Toothless smiled as well, savoring the comfort of his human's weight on his back.

::That would be a... close call. But I was not referring to my tail:::

The horizon began to lighten with the coming of dawn and the sea crashed against the shore, faint but audible. Steady, thin streams of smoke were visible just a couple rôsts ahead, no doubt rising from an assemblage of chimneys.

Not quite knowing what to say, Hiccup swallowed, straightened, and laid a hand on Toothless' crown.
With a breath he said, "Let's set camp here, before we get too close to that town."

Together, they banked left and dropped. Hiccup always made sure to have plenty of trees for Toothless to hide in; far enough away from civilization to avoid a surprise detection, close enough in case he needed to run into town.

The boy was out of the saddle and landing on the hard dirt before Toothless' paws touched the ground. The air already tasted wintry to him and it wouldn't be long before he'd start waking up with his moccasins covered in frost. He'd need something to cover his face soon as well for he didn't think he nose and cheeks could handle much more abuse.

"So why did you get separated?" Hiccup asked as he removed his harness. He was glad to be rid of it; the hard edges of the shoulder-guards had begun to dig into his collarbone and hinder the mobility of his arms. Some refitting was in order.

::That is...an important story::

Hiccup could hear the hesitance, the uncertainty. He turned away from his gear. "Oh?"

Toothless met Hiccup's eyes and said, ::It has to do with the war:::

This had Hiccup's attention. His fear of broaching this subject with Toothless was based mostly on an inability find common ground or reason. What if, when it came down to it, they were both more loyal to their own species? What if one conversation had the power to drive them apart? He'd already given up too much to lose Toothless as well.

Hiccup lowered himself to the ground, crossing his legs. His knees bounced.

::I was hunting with my drove::: Toothless began, mindful of Hiccup's caution, :::to bring in the kill for the Blue Ones and the Faded, and I traveled more south than I ever had. I suppose I was a bit arrogant at the time; we would contest over who could deliver the biggest prey, or the most deadly. In the far north we have yetis and narwhals, and a whole assortment of usual, boring quarry I had taken down before. I thought that by straying only a bit I would find some new, exotic creature. Such as a troll or eachy, or a lesser dragon, like a zomok—:::

"Toothless," Hiccup interrupted with a light smile playing on his lips. "You're rambling."

The dragon paused, his brow lying flat over his eyes.

::I never used to ramble before I met you...oh, fine. In my efforts to outshine my brethren, I had fallen into a trap:::

Hiccup sat up straighter, thinking instantly of his own contraption that had caught Toothless unawares.

The dragon seemed to inhale, as though to steel himself before he continued.

::The only thing I remember with a clear mind is a ringing and a... a pull. From there it was like my ears and eyes had been buried in thick snow, and the only thing I knew for certain was that I had to keep Her pleased::: His ears fell flat against his head as he recalled the temptress that had stolen a piece of his life. ::She draws you into her with the most hypnotic effect...and from that moment all you will ever feel is a... is this sick... a sick alternation of fear and gratification...:::

"She?" Hiccup asked, with narrowed eyes. The dragon's less than cohesive explanation left him more confused. Toothless spoke in riddles, with an unease that put Hiccup on edge.
"A demon. To the east of your old village, between other lands, She dwells within a fire rock. That was where she kept us, stored us, like leftovers waiting to be used. She has this technique, this magic...it...it enslaves us. We are at her mercy, doing her bidding, feeding her lest she eat us... To this day, I cannot understand how she could reduce the mightiest of minds into mush. At the time, I had not realized, of course...but after I had escaped—now—it infuriates me to no end::

"So you guys are being controlled?" Hiccup asked in a hushed voice. That...that would change everything. Everything about the war, everything about why they fought...

Hiccup jumped at his pack and began throwing out clothing and money sacks at random until he emerged with the map. Some areas were smudged from elemental abuse, but it was otherwise legible.

He unrolled it across the ground before Toothless.

"You said it was to the east of Berk?" Hiccup drew his finger from the island rightward. "But equidistant from other landmasses...it sounds like this thing is stationed where the North Sea and the Norwegian Sea meet...that would give it access to the most prominent Viking settlements...it's smart." Hiccup sat back on his heels and ran his hand through his hair.

::A dragon would rather be taken down by a human than have a human hunt for him::: Toothless groused. ::She humiliated us without us ever realizing::

Toothless bunkered down on the ground, front paws to Hiccup's knees, not even thinking to warm it first as he usually did. Hiccup could tell the dragon was once again stewing on this conundrum, turning it over and over within his mind. It was a look on his face he had worn several times before, but until now Hiccup hadn't been clued into his thought process.

As he watched Toothless' claws unconsciously gouge into the dirt, it struck Hiccup how powerfully this entire ordeal had plagued Toothless' mind from their very first meeting. Knowing Toothless as he did, Hiccup feared the dragon would find fault in himself, and blame the capture and continued oppression to his own mental weakness.

"Why couldn't you just fly out of range?" Hiccup asked, trying to make sense of it all. "Would she come after you?"

Toothless snorted at the idea of Her moving from her roost.

::She would have those of weaker minds come after you—not that anyone made it so far. She kept you from leaving her reach; She had specific areas under her control, certain human villages which were alternated between for feeding. Once She was in your mind there was no thoughts of escape. You hardly even know something was wrong until you were out of it::: Toothless locked eyes with Hiccup and the boy could have sworn he felt the gratitude Toothless was trying to convey.

::Hiccup...when you hit me with that...weapon, you knocked me out of her range—before She or I could do anything. One minute it was a routine night and suddenly...well, it hurt, but reality hit me harder. And so abruptly! But it was there, I was still free, and that is all that matters. I...I would have given up my tailfin just for that:::

Hiccup bit his lip and found it difficult to continue to hold Toothless' intense stare. He didn't know what to say, how to respond. He couldn't suddenly stop feeling guilty because Toothless found the loss worth his freedom. Hiccup's need to fit in may have led him to Toothless, and it may have freed himself from a life of constraint on an island that would never accept him, but he could never, would never, feel justified in taking Toothless' independent flight from him.
"So...this "war" is really at the hands of a demon," Hiccup forced himself to continue. "It's kill or be killed on both sides. The humans are the victims and the dragons are the tools; we really don't need to be fighting each other..." He finally met Toothless' gaze. "If she were gone, then the dragons...?"

::Would move on, I imagine, probably back to their own nests. Like me, most of the dragons were caught like flies in a web. It is a web we cannot see and cannot fight. What started out as only a couple nests worth of dragons has grown into an army of hundreds of slaves. And the more we feed her, the more power she gains, and the cycle will persevere. This is something that needs to be stopped, because it will only worsen with time. Who knows how long this has been going on, and who knows how long it's going to take before its more than just Vikings being targeted::

"And you think we're the ones who should break the cycle?" Hiccup asked, his voice dropping an octave. Toothless answered with a slow nod.

::Given the circumstances, I would say we're the only ones who know what is really going on. We might be the only ones who can stop it::

Hiccup rubbed his hand across the back of his neck and turned his face upwards. Lengthy bangs fell across his eyes. He squeezed them shut at the implications. "I...I don't think I'm ready to go back..."

::I know you are not::

Hiccup smiled, thankful for Toothless' unwavering support. Of course, he suspected that Toothless had his own reservations; that he was still trying to come to terms with his enslavement before he could ever face the demon again.

"I think we're both entitled to be a little selfish right now," Hiccup said, falling forward out of his kneel and collapsing on the ground next to the dragon. He turned, stared up at the rapidly lightening, pink-streaked sky and suddenly found a new sort of optimism within himself.

"But maybe someday, when we're ready, we'll go back and save everyone."

::Yes, because we've always wanted to be heroes:: Toothless said with his every growing sarcasm. He rested his head on his crossed paws and watched his human.

Hiccup nudged the dragon's shoulder with his fist. "If you think about it, we did at one point. We both seemed to go out of our way to show off."

::Yeah, and if you think about it, it didn't turn out quite right for either of us, did it? That hero business is more trouble than its worth, in my opinion::

"I'll say," Hiccup cheered, feeling much lighter than he had a moment ago. "We can be unheroes. We'll save them when we're good and ready."

::Hear! Hear!:: the cheer came beneath a small roar of approval.

"I'll have to get some mead so we can start making toasts at moments like these."

Toothless seemed to smile in his gaze, and he flicked his tail around so that it fell onto Hiccup's face. The boy batted it off, chuckling.

::Right, enough with the serious, heavy stuff. I want to know, right now, what you humans are thinking when you desecrate meats by rubbing grains and plants in them and then burn them. And why, for the love of all that is winged and scaled, do you catch something and then not eat it? It is no wonder you are getting raided for your food when you stick it up on display out in the open where
"Okay, okay!" Hiccup yelped as Toothless prodded his side with a claw. "First of all, it's called seasoning and cooking. We have a very...snobbish sense of taste, okay? Things have to taste good. Besides, cooking meat makes it easier to eat—"

::How can it be easier to eat if it is tough and tasteless? You burn out all the blood when you 'cook' it!::

"Oh please! You see these?" Hiccup sat up and briefly pulled the corners of his mouth apart to show off two rows of blunted teeth. "These are my weak little human teeth! Meat needs to be tender for me to chew it and that's what the cooking does."

::Ridiculous... Let me see those again::

Hiccup complied, feeling foolish but enthused with their silly conversation. It was uplifting, and exactly what he needed after having the war bomb dropped on him. Now wasn't the time for making life or death decisions or worrying about who would outlive the other. Now was the time to enjoy his youth with his best friend.

Toothless moved his face inches from Hiccup's as he observed the teeth.

::I've never seen human teeth this close up before::

"Dat's 'cuth 'e 'on't attack 'ith ah vouves like 'oo do."

::I thought they would at least be sharper in the back. It is a miracle you can eat at all:: Toothless continued as his voice betrayed his honest wonder. ::They are like little, ivory blocks all lined up! How quaint...::

Hiccup closed his mouth and scowled. "They're good for crunching...and smiling without terrifying people."

::I am terrified when you smile. Usually it precedes you doing something stupid::

In response, Hiccup smiled. Big and wide, with eyes that spoke of guile. Toothless' ears lowered an inch.

::What?::

Hiccup launched himself at the dragon, springing onto his back and wrapping his arms around Toothless' neck in some kind of a chokehold. It wasn't easy, seeing how one hand could only just grasp the other wrist over the girth of it, and the immediate thrashing Toothless began made hanging on even harder.

"Is this stupid, yet?" Hiccup laughed, locking his knees tightly behind the joints of Toothless' forelegs to secure his place against the bucking.

::Just about:: Toothless retorted, mindful not to accidentally knock his rider against a tree—not too hard anyway. ::But you can't hang on too much longer before I throw you off!::

"Maybe I won't have to!"

Toothless could feel sharp, dexterous fingers scratching around the bone of his jaw whenever they weren't desperately trying to keep Hiccup's weight on him.
Toothless twisted so fast within Hiccup's hold the boy would ponder over it for years to come, and successfully escaped the leg-lock. Within that same, quick and fluid motion, the dragon managed to snag the side of Hiccup's shirt with his teeth and jerked his head to the side. Hiccup was yanked from Toothless's neck, the momentum propelling his back into the solid dirt.

"Guh—!" Hiccup gasped as the wind was knocked from him. He didn't have the breath left to cry out as a gummy, dank maw clamped over the sides of his head. Saliva dampened his hair and even with a blotted vision Hiccup knew his head was currently in a dragon's mouth.

Hiccup shoved at Toothless' snout as he heard: ::I just bit your head off. I win::

Toothless thought the cease in Hiccup's struggles was clear a sign of submission and began to count another triumph to his favor. That is, until he felt familiar nails scratch under his chin and he blacked out into bliss.

Moments later his bearings returned to him, and Toothless found himself blinking his eyes to the sight of Hiccup rubbing his sleeves over the soggiest parts of his hair.

"That was gross," Hiccup grumbled when he noticed Toothless looking at him.

::That was cheap::

"My head smells like fish."

::Your head tastes like victory. You were already "dead" so what you did does not count::

"What if someone happened to walk by and saw you with my head in your mouth? You'd be attacked on the spot."

::You just don't want me to do that again. You know I am going to, especially considering how much you do not seem to like it::

"Aw, you ripped my tunic," Hiccup continued with a deaf ear turned toward his friend. He stuck his
hand through the tear down the seam. "Look at this!"

::Looks better, I think::

Hiccup pursed his lips. Then sighed.

"Ah well, I was planning on running into town anyway. Might as well stock up for the long haul while I can still somewhat communicate. I'll add a new tunic to the list."

::And new...shoes:: Toothless supplied. ::Did you not say they were hurting your feet:::

"Hmm, yeah," Hiccup said thoughtfully as he glanced down at his feet. His toes had been cramped for a while now and he had stretched the leather as far as it would go; already the soles were pulling back from broken stitching. "Well, looks like its light enough out to pop in. Won't I be a sight..."

He went to his bag and pulled out the beige cloak, throwing it over his shoulders, and then tied a money pouch to his belt.

"Ow vell are my English sounding?" Hiccup said in the language. "I've been practicing."

::I have told you: I cannot hear a different language. But you sound much less intelligent, if that helps::

Hiccup gave him a flat stare. "Thanks, I must be doing something right. See you in a few... And try to stay out of trouble!"

Toothless watched as Hiccup plodded off into the woods, still rubbing at his hair.

::No promises. And remember to bring me back some fish:::

"No promises!"

Chapter End Notes

Lots of Hictooth bonding bromance. Hope you didn't get cavities!

**Toothless knows what seasons are, and how most of the world uses them for time measurement, but he grew up never using/seeing them so he would have no idea how "old" he was to a human.**
Eluded

Chapter Summary

Hiccup can't seem to help but run into trouble everywhere he goes.

Chapter Notes

Just a quick note before this first scene... a language that IS NOT Norse, even if Hiccup can understand it, is going to be "italicized". Carry on!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Fell outta a tree, didja?"

The middle-aged woman gave the frayed tunic a firm shake and held it up before her. Dark, sharp eyes trailed the edges of the tear, finding no slivers of bark in the strained stitching.

"Yes," the shirtless boy before her said with resolution. His confidence more likely came from knowing what the word meant than confirming his story.

Even without the accent, Winifred Hallows knew this Hiksti character wasn't from around these parts—especially with a name like 'Hiksti'. His skin appeared freshly washed and paler than most males, making him stick out in the peasant-laden village like a bloomed daffodil in winter. He wore a rough, loose sort of hose, which were more commonly found on noblemen, but carried minimal effects. He traveled in strange, fur-lined boots.

She threw the tunic back at him, which he caught in deft fingers.

Hiccup stared at her, bewildered. He wondered if she sensed his lie and was rejecting his offer because of it.

"I'll make ya' a new one," she said curtly. "I noticed yer sleeves were fallin' a little short there. You can put that back on and I'll have one for ya' tomorrow."

Hiccup made no move to do as she asked, still bearing the same shocked expression. The woman grunted and rolled her eyes.

"Do you understand what I'm saying to you?" she said, slowly.

"Yes," said Hiccup, and as if to prove as much he threw the tunic back over his head.

"Is that the only word you know?"

Hiccup knew the word 'tailor', which he repeated to several villagers before enough fingers pointed him to the right hut. Though small, the living quarters of the woman—who later introduced herself as Winifred—was filled with lines of fabric, piles of yarn, and a spinning wheel. Immediately, Hiccup knew he came to the right place.
He smiled at her and pointed to the kettle she had situated in the center of the small room.

"Can you... build... no. Can you make it color...?"

Winifred looked between him and the kettle.

"You want it dyed?" she asked.

Hiccup nodded.

"Black?"

"Blehck," he repeated, trying the word on his tongue. He thought it funny how he reaffirmed the same word to Toothless just that morning, and now here he stood learning the word in a different language.

"I mean... most wouldn't want... well, if you're willing to pay extra, then sure."

"I vill pay you, vell," Hiccup assured her. He patted the sack of coins tied to his recently adorned belt. The silver pieces gave a tantalizing jingle, and he suspected he carried more money than a villager of this class had seen in one bag.

"See to it that you do," Winifred said, putting on her hardest face. It wasn't easy being a widow in these times (thank the good Lord she had a skill to help her get by), and she wasn't going to add being swindled by a foreign merchant to her strife. Especially if he brought trouble.

The young man seemed harmless at a glance, but for someone like him—a mere boy—to be traveling alone in these parts, and then lying about how his clothes ripped of all things, clearly pointed to a deviant nature.

Hiccup sensed her suspicions and decided to take his leave. He was getting a whole new tunic out of this, and Winifred said she could be done by the next day. He wouldn't push his luck and antagonize her with his presence.

He took a step towards the door and stopped. Toothless's earlier comment returned to him.

Hiccup turned back to the tailor and asked, "To you haeff foot... builders...?"

Winifred stared at the stranger.

"Foot builders?" she repeated.

The boy kicked out a foot in front of him and jabbed his finger at his boot.

"They harr being... fery behd," he supplied and Winifred immediately noticed the dismal state of the heavy-duty shoes. It clicked.

"The cobbler!" she could have laughed at the things coming out of this boy's mouth. "Course kid. The Lord's manor's down that way," Winifred pointed west, "—shoemaker's just outside the walls. Does all the nobility's foot dressings. And I expect you'll be wanting some more of those fancy foot things ya got on now?"

She talked too fast for Hiccup to really get what she was trying to say to him, but he understood the pointed finger well.

"Zank you," he said, heading out for real this time. "I vill come behck tomorrow."
“Yeah, yeah, you just make sure you come back with that money pouch.”

"Yes!" Hiccup called over his shoulder. He left the establishment—if it could be called one—and headed towards the direction of the shoemaker.

As he walked his mind wandered, and he realized he couldn't keep his thoughts away from his conversation with Toothless—the war in particular.

He could see the reasoning for both sides—demon excluded—and knew that fault could be forgiven. It was a war—of course there was no right side. Furthermore, he and Toothless held no particular responsibility to either of their races (especially since there were no other Night Furies in the web). Hiccup had nothing to feel repentant about for choosing to enjoy his own time first.

The war had been sustaining itself for the last three centuries; both sides would be fine without their help for a while. As long as the dragons continued to provide the demon with food they would survive, and be none the wiser at that. And the Vikings...well the Vikings loved to fight. Hiccup could almost say they wouldn't want to be rescued if it meant taking away an excuse to lop heads off.

In a way, learning the truth behind the war erased much of the guilt he carried about leaving. Sure, to his village he'll still look like the traitor who ran off with the dragons, but at least now he knew it wasn't the wrong choice. He knew he didn't betray his race for one that had mercilessly killed humans. He knew that, not culturally, but morally, he was still in the right. And for now, knowing was enough for his conscience.

Maybe if he and Toothless did manage to get rid of the demon, and they stopped the war, he would be able to talk to his dad without getting shot down on the spot...

The hair on the back of Hiccup's neck stood on end; he felt the stares of the villagers follow his every move. He adjusted his cloak to his cover his left shoulder as subtle as he could; he wanted to conceal his money… and flash the dagger strapped at his right with every other step. He wanted to discourage any kind of trouble.

And from the many eyes that followed him it wouldn't be hard to attract it.

The people of Wessex were too suspicious and too superstitious for Hiccup to waste any time dawdling. He picked up his speed, intent on getting to the shoemaker without aggravating anyone.

After all, he had a long history of being incapable of crossing a town without ruining someone's day.

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::You don't look any different:: Toothless commented when Hiccup appeared later. While the human was gone, he had moved to a more open area outside of the forest and had curled up on a sun-heated rock for a nap. For him, hardly any time passed between Hiccup leaving and Hiccup returning.

"I'm picking up my stuff tomorrow," the boy answered. "Then we can leave tomorrow night."

Toothless snorted by way of agreement, and placed his head back on the ground. Hiccup began hopping boulders to get to Toothless' perch. He swore when he stubbed his toe after a miscalculated jump.

"Hey," Hiccup started as he pulled off his boot to rub his foot, "You're nocturnal right? You said
Night Furies avoided the sun and that you had to learn to live with it.

::Yeah?:: Toothless prompted, though it sounded like he had an idea as to where this was going.

"But you seem to like the sun quite a bit..." Hiccup sounded teasing.

Toothless rolled his eyes and dropped his head back on the ground.

::My kind were always regaled with tales of how our scales would shrivel up and our bodies would burn until nothing was left if the sun's heat every touched us. I know now it was a ruse to keep the Blue Ones from straying from the drove::

Hiccup kept on smiling.

::It's alright, I suppose:: Toothless admitted gruffly.

"You like it."

::Shut up. You did not bring me any fish::

"Whoops," Hiccup said, and he sounded somewhat sincere in his regret. "I kind of wanted to get out of there as soon as possible. People aren't too friendly with strangers, and the fact that I was prancing around from craft-master to craft-master with no visible trade...well, I think it was obvious I was carrying money somewhere."

::Did anyone follow you::

Hiccup leaned back, resting his arms behind his head.

"Not today."

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"It's not the same type of wool your other one was made of, but it'll do it's job."

"It is fine," Hiccup assured the seamstress. "I like it mahch."

He dropped three silver pieces into her grubby palm and for the first time since they met he saw her smile, revealing dimly stained and crooked teeth. Her face, like every other face he came across as of late, was smudged with many months' worth of dirt. Hiccup had quickly come to learn that Saxons, and other Southerners, rarely bathed. He didn't understand it, but this wasn't his country so he wouldn't say anything. She probably thought he was some sort of vagabond nobility sneaking around. She wouldn't be too far from the truth.

Winifred dropped the money in the front pocket of her apron.

"You a merchant?" she asked, looking skeptical despite the smile, like she still couldn't get over how young and solitary he appeared. "Merchant business is dangerous. I hope you're not wandering about alone."

Hiccup smiled, because he knew smiling was understood in all languages.

"No. Jahst trehfeler. I'm tough." He made a muscle to emphasize his declaration, liking the way he
hardly felt a pull from the new tunic.

The woman laughed sharply. The boy looked like he was only growing up and not out.

"Sure, sure. You be careful out there," she bid him.

"Thank you!" Hiccup was getting good with the pronunciation of that particular word.

He already had picked up the moccasins; giving his toes lots of coveted wiggle room and steps that were less pained. The Cobbler had seemed quite interested in the style of his shoes and asked to keep his old ones as a reference for further improvements on his trade. Hiccup had no problem with this, especially since it knocked down the original price to one silver piece.

Hiccup began his walk down to the port to fetch a treat for Toothless, observing the ships and people and enjoying the briny taste of the air. There were about five ship at the dock, and only Cogs at that. Still, he reckoned this was a bit of a wealthier area, having the advantage of being seaside and more open for trade.

He strolled by wooden boxes of freshly caught fish, bypassing anything remotely long and slimy, and finally stopped in front of some fat looking herring. He could try to fish it himself further down the coast but the herring was right there, and he was feeling rather lazy. An afternoon of speaking English exhausted him.

Besides, these waters had quite a few eels and he’d probably end up smelling like them before he caught anything Toothless would eat.

Oh! That’s what he would ask Toothless about next: his ridiculous aversion to eels!

A sudden, strong breeze pushed his hair around his face and brought a chill through his cloak.

Waves slapped against coarse rocks and sand. Louder. Faster. The tide picked up. Hiccup looked out to the sea, out to the blackened waters that foretold of an incoming storm. There was something disquieting about the way the shadows moved beneath the water. He felt...watched. Like something —

A dog barked close to his side. Hiccup let out an alarmed yelp. The animal's short, pointed ears were pressed flat against its skull and its hackles were raised. Its lip curled high above slobbery teeth, revealing black gums. Hiccup took a step back as the dog continued its verbal attack.

An elderly fellow stepped up behind the noisy animal. His leathery, weather-beaten skin belayed a life lived on those very shores.

"Odd. He's usually real friendly, even with strangers," the man remarked. He scratched at his rough, wrinkled chin and narrowed his eyes at the foreigner.

"Huh," Hiccup made a noncommittal noise. The dog's barking and growling was starting to attract more of that borderline-hostile attention he despised. Not to mention the consistency of the racket had begun to grate on his nerves.

"Zree, please," he said, gesturing to the box of fish and holding out the satchel he brought with him.

The man stared at him a moment longer, the dog's barking and the tremulous waters becoming nothing more than background noise. Hiccup felt his unease at the situation steadily increase. The weight of the stares closed in on him, overwhelming and suffocating. Above it all, Hiccup felt a presence about this area—dangerous and oppressing—further enclosing him in the tunneled, surreal
feeling of being surrounded and singled out all at once.

Then the old man moved and the spell was broken. Three fish were collected and deposited roughly in Hiccup's bag. Clearly, the fisherman didn't trust anyone his dog didn't. Hiccup handed the man a coin, more than ready to get the Hel out of there.

He walked quickly towards the edge of the town. The dog continuing to bark at his back.

Hiccup bit his lip. He had never elicited such a reaction from an animal before; usually, his "unvikingly" kind disposition warmed animals to him.

It must have been the scent of a Night Fury, he realized. That dog probably associated him with a dragon. A predator. The thought comforted Hiccup, and his shoulders relaxed.

Something splashed loudly and the side of Hiccup's face became unexpectedly wet.

He stopped walking and turned to the ocean. He was too far from the water for it to be a simple spray of the waves, and he moved fast enough so that no people were nearby...

His grip tightened around his bag. He took a step closer and peered at the channel. The water moved oddly...the waves colliding in opposite directions in some parts, as though something besides the wind disturbed the sea...

 Toothless lifted his head from his crisscrossed paws, his nose held high in the air as a concerning scent assaulted him. He knew this scent: the sickly, oily smell of a thousand eels. It penetrated the air like a sharp arrow, ruining any chance for a nice snooze.

The most worrying part was that it came from the village...where his boy was.

Toothless sprang to his feet, ears back and pupils thinned. Before he could rush into the trees something else blindsided his senses. Something approaching that was quick, hurried, and short of breath.

"Toothless!"

::Hiccup?::

More cracking and crunching rang from the tree line, and Hiccup's distinctive scent (accented by fish) became clear moments before the boy burst out of the brush. Twigs and leaves stuck to his leggings, his hair half-licked by sap, but he was smiling.

"Toothless! We gotta go!" Hiccup yelped as he rushed towards his belongings and threw everything together in his bag.

Toothless noticed the new boots and dark tunic that was far baggier than his last shirt.

::What is going on?: Tooothless asked. He felt rather alarmed by the scents mixed by Hiccup's behavior. Was it a monster? A dragon? Was it the thing he sensed not moments ago?

"We're being followed," Hiccup grinned. Toothless couldn't understand why the boy looked like he was ready to burst into giggles. "They'll be here any moment! Come'on!"
Toothless demanded, but almost as soon as the words left he heard the faint crashing of two, burly humans approaching gracelessly through the forest.

"I told you—sit still!—I told you people were suspicious of me!" Hiccup cried as he began to secure the saddle on Toothless. "They know I have money and they know I don't look like I can put up much of a fight. Easy target."

"And they don't know you just led them to a dragon:" Toothless added wryly.

"Ha, ha! Nope!" Hiccup swung himself onto the saddle. "Let's fly!"

They took off and not a moment too soon. If the wind from the powerful beats of Toothless' wings didn't stop the two emerging Saxons in their tracks, then the mere sight of a dragon taking to the sky was.

"Woah! What the bleedin' devil—?"

"Christ! He transformed 'imself into a monster!"

"Nay! Nay! He's right there! He's riding it!"

"Witchcraft, it is! Devilry!"

Hiccup looked behind him, down at the diminishing earth where the two men were grounded, staring horrified at the sky and screaming obscenities.

"Better luck next time!" Hiccup called behind him in Norse and he laughed loudly. It was still light out, and they were too close to the village not to be spotted by others before they reached the clouds, but nothing could catch them over the sea.

Nothing could catch them, period.

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This time of year showed a lively, bustling Berk, with Vikings rushing to and fro, doing their part to prepare for a long and cold winter. Wool was spun and warm blankets sewn. Crops were sowed and cows were slaughtered. Trees were hacked down and divvied into piles and piles of firewood. No Viking was exempt from helping in these times.

Not even the elderly, with their creaky bones and aching joints.

"Amma! Amma!"

Berk's esteemed and beloved Elder pulled away from the medicinal herbs she had been arranging and smiled beatifically at her granddaughter. The little brunette scampered over the last hill, hopping over rocks and potholes as though each movement were part of a game known only to children.

"Do you know what today is?" the child asked as she reached the woman, clasping her hands behind her back and rocking on her heels. She smiled, big and wide, bearing proudly the holes of several missing teeth.

The Elder planted a fist on each hip. "I'm not so old as to forget my own granddaughter's eighth birthday!"

The girl giggled and stood straighter. The odd, braided pigtails stuck straight out on her head; up and forward to imitate a bull's horns. The girl's hair was so thick they could be directed anywhere.

"So what are you doing now?" she asked with all the curiosity of a proper eight year old.

"Well," the Elder began kindly, "I've just gathered all the herbs I think I'll need to survive the winter and I'm separating them so I can dry them out and preserve them. Do you recognize any of them?"

The girl skipped up to the worktable and observed the piles of stems and leaves. "Hmm, I don't think so."

"An eight-year-old would know," the Elder teased. That kicked her youngest grandchild into gear. The girl pointed to a purplish-stemmed, red-flowered plant.

"That's mugwort!"

The older of the pair squinted down at the child. Of all the things to pick, she named the herb used for flavoring ale.

"You guessed, didn't you?"

The girl stuck her bottom lip out stubbornly. "You can't prove anything!"

The Elder threw her head back and laughed. Rarely did she get to laugh these days.

"You remind me much of myself at your age, dear one," she praised, patting the child on the head. The girl looked delighted at the acclaim.

"Do you think I'll be the village Elder, someday?"

"If you live long enough."

"Mother says I'm stubborn. And everyone knows stubborn people don't die!" the girl said resolutely.

"Someday, when you are older, I will explain to you how wrong that is," the Elder said, her voice dry. "You will also need to be very knowledgeable. You would certainly need to be able to
recognize all these plants."

The child looked horrified at the nearly unrecognizable array of foliage. She indulged in such worry for a moment before facing her grandmother.

"Would... would having dreams make me like you? A völva?"

The old woman blinked.

"Well..." she began. "That depends on the sort of dream you are having and how well you can read the signs."

She knew her grandchild referred to the shaman abilities many Elders of past had shown. Abilities that had manifested in herself as a girl.

"I had the strangest dream last night," the child went on. "There was a boy and there was a giant eel! And the boy was in the eel's mouth, but the boy didn't feel afraid. I even sort of felt excited when I woke up!"

"That is a strange dream," the Elder agreed. She returned to separating the herbs, a smile fixated on her face. Trust a simple conversation with a child to brighten one's day.

"He looked a lot like the boy who left," the girl continued. "The chief's son."

The Elder drew her thumb to her mouth with a hiss. Since when did chervil have damnable thorns on the stems? She pulled the appendage from her lips and found minimal damage.

"Are you okay Amma?" the little girl cried out after sighting the pinprick of blood beading from the rough pad.

The woman hardly seemed to be listening.

"Yes...yes...a strange dream indeed..." the Elder murmured. She turned to the young girl—so full of innocence—and placed a hand on her shoulder. "But I think it would be best if you only spoke to me of these dreams."

The girl smiled, knowing nothing but trust at her age.

"Okay Amma!"

Chapter End Notes

TRANSLATION NOTES!

Hiksti = Hiccup

A while back I was pointed out the inconsistency of Hiccup introducing himself in English (He'd say his name in Norse), so I got the translation from Fjordmustang (who is reigning champion for writing the BEST Toothless POV fic. Go check it out!)

Ama = Grandmother
The little girl—the elder's granddaughter—is actually a character seen in the movie (not to say that's her canon relationship with Gothi). It's the part on the docks when they're loading Toothless onto the ship. Gothi pulls to children close to her—the "granddaughter" is one of them.

Anyway, I know things got a little confusing for a bit, and they might get more confusing. Just a head's up!

Also, I apologize for my terrible old art.
Chapter Summary

Tensions are high in the Hofferson Household. And between our boys.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hiccup preferred to stay above the clouds when flying by night... especially on nights when those clouds collected to form a solid blanket to cover the world. Above the clouds, Hiccup could see fairly well, for even dark clouds would reflect and enhance the light of the moon and the stars, so that even his pitiful, human eyes could appreciate his surroundings.

But below a starless overcast, with nothing but black waters and sightless skies surrounding him, Hiccup was left visually numbed. He felt like he was moving through a cold, black vortex. It made flying *unejoyable*.

And yet, here they were—the moon just passing the apex of its rise as they skimmed the crested peaks of the channel's whitecaps, leaving Hiccup chilled and wind whipped, as well as blind.

All because of Toothless.

::*I can catch this one without you even noticing!::*

It didn't take long into their friendship for Hiccup to realize Toothless had a bit of an arrogant, competitive streak...as well as a penchant for showing off.

"I got news for you: I've already noticed," Hiccup said dryly. He was anything but amused with his best friend. His soaked and freezing feet were a testament to *that*.

Toothless thought he could do a quick skim-and-snatch without getting Hiccup wet. He couldn't. Yet.

::*This time you won't:* Toothless assured him. He didn't seem to have a problem sensing fish traveling too close to the surface.

"If I lose my feet, I won't be able to help you fly. And then we'll both be grounded and miserable."

::*You're so dramatic...:*:

Hiccup sighed loudly, hoping to at least make his displeasure known.

He'd make it to land before his feet froze off—both he and Toothless knew that much-and his new boots had been doing a fairly good job of protecting them. And Toothless *did* require more food than him, if barely, so a little midnight snack was understandable...

But he wanted to *see*! He was a human; relying on his hearing would only bring him so much comfort—his sense of smell even less so. At best Hiccup could guess how close he was to the water
by the sound of small waves slapping against each other. All he could smell was salt and thick air waiting to be showered through—

Toothless released a short, panicked wail and jerked up. His body arched back so suddenly that his rider found himself vertical.

"Whoa!"

Hiccup's reflexes engaged. He slammed his foot into position two to counter the movement. He couldn't see. He had no warning. He could only trust.

For the first time in months the dragon-human duo's movements were out of sync. Hiccup's actions unintentionally put Toothless with his back to the water, belly-up, making the boy clinger harder to the dragon. Toothless still moved under the effects of panic, now augmented in that split second of complete vulnerability, and quickly twisted in midair to right himself with beating wings that desperately aimed to get the pair away from the water.

The abrupt maneuver yanked at Hiccup's leg and he let out a pained. His fingers gripped wet leather as gravity tried to dislodge him.

"Okay, okay!" he growled, trying to figure out Toothless' intentions. He shifted the tailfin to position four and let Toothless do the rest. They accelerated, higher and higher, at a faster and more desperate pace than Hiccup had ever experienced before.

Hiccup knew they passed through the clouds when the air got cold and clammy and dense—and then light! Wan and grey but still there and still showing that Hiccup did, indeed, have two hands in front of him. He would have been more interested in his improved vision had he not just experienced a mini panic attack.

"What was that?" Hiccup gasped. His heart pounded high in his chest and their new altitude reminded him of how cold salt water could be at night; he hadn't forgotten his "pirating the pirates" escapade.

::There's something down there...it's big...:: Toothless sounded apologetic. ::Are you okay::

Hiccup could practically feel the anxiety rolling off of the Night Fury. He had to wonder how close they were to danger without him even realizing until Toothless acted.

And if he had fallen... they both would have been in trouble.

His hands moved to the chilled scales on Toothless' neck, wanting to give himself any extra sensory intake. His leg hurt—he probably pulled something—and now more than just the air shook his arms.

"I'm fine. Let's get to Flanders," was all Hiccup said.

If something could scare Toothless then he had no desire to meet it himself.

#######

"Astrid, dear, would you come here for a moment?" Glüm Hofferson called to her daughter as she expertly tugged a needle through the margin of a linen dress.
Said girl looked up from the Sprang she had been attempting to master. Her mother had been forcing her to practice, claiming Astrid at least needed the domestic know-how of a proper Viking. Though resentful of the distraction, Astrid tackled the task much in the same way she tackled everything else: with precision, determination, and perfection.

Unfortunately, the pattern she had been trying to keep steady refused to bend to her will, and she made a silent declaration that the loom would become her greatest adversary...second only to dragons.

She put the bone stick and threads down (none too gently), giving her work a withering glare for its disobedience, before standing.

"Yes?" She asked with forced politeness. Her patience had been thin all day and the stifling home didn't help.

Astrid had always been close to her father who, at the present time, was away on an exploring expedition and wouldn't be back for a fortnight. He was the one she could bond with over weapons and joke with as they sparred. Without his large, but calming, presence in their household, things between she and her mother were becoming more and more strained.

"You know Gnawretch, right?" Glüm asked. The woman continued with her work, able to wield a needle and hold a conversation like a master. And though she had no intention of ever spending so much time on her rear, Astrid couldn't keep the envy from her breast. She had never been a multitasker—she was too focused.

"Yeah..." the girl prompted, suspicious. On the isle of Berk, everybody knew everybody, and Gnawretch was no exception. The man aged around in his early thirties, a fair dragon killer but a better boat crafter, and recently widowed last winter when his young wife fell to illness in the last months of her first pregnancy.

"Well, he's come to us with a proposal—"

A subliminal dread had loomed over the conversation from its start, but it wasn't until now that it registered to Astrid why.

"Mother, no!"

"—and a rather generous bride-price. His family is in good standing—"

"I'm a warrior!" Astrid argued, trying to push down the panic threatening to overrule her emotions. She had to stay in control... but she'd do anything to avoid this. Anything. "I'm the best!"

Glüm sighed. "You are, dear, but—"

"You...you can't just marry me off! Not now. This village needs me, probably more than it needs half the warriors here!"

"And I need you taken care of," Glüm said over her daughter's objections. "You're sixteen-plenty old to be married. And..." she paused, only for a second, "and there is the financial aspect of this to consider, which is why we have not agreed to anything yet." Glüm hesitated again, carefully choosing her next words. "You are the best, love, and your father and I are so proud of you... which is why we're expecting more offers over this winter and the next. Wretch is a smart match, but there could be better if we're smart about this."

Astrid had to consciously keep her mouth from dropping open.
"What am I? Some yak to auction off?" she shrieked in derision.

Her face felt hot. Astrid wanted to curse her mother for bringing this to her, curse Gnawretch for instigating it, curse her father for not being here to stand up for her, she wanted to curse herself for not seeing this coming after weeks of annoying, subtle hints. But most of all, she wanted to curse the gods for making her a woman. Why oh why couldn't she have been born boy? Or a Bog? Or off of Berk? Even during times of war when their roles were more equal—it was never the same. She... she was being held back.

Status, children, survival—those were the Viking priorities. Or rather: survival, children, then status, as Berk would have it. Everything tied into the war. Men were allowed to make fighting their number one priority; many would get married for propriety and to continue their bloodline and to avoid stigma. It was a simple, straightforward life that Astrid would be able to have complete control over. One that she could advance in.

But when a woman married she was suddenly running a household and expected to put her family first, to ensure their safety before running out for the kill. Women never got the first kill when they ran a home...

And the pregnancies... oh gods. She didn't want... she...

"Do not take that tone with me!" Glüm snapped. "This is our way, you know that. This shouldn't come as a surprise to you. Would you rather be married to a Southerner? Be no more than a piece of property? Your 16, for Odin's sake! Thor almighty—we've been far too lenient with your generation. We could have been accepting bride negotiations years ago for you but, no, your father decided to indulge in your need to become an exceptional warrior."

Glüm thought of the Thorsten girl that Astrid used to hang out with. The poor thing was nearly seventeen and didn't look to have any marriage on the horizon.

'Course that could have more to do with how she terrified all the men...

"You can still fight and be married," she added. Her voice was softer, placating even, but she the gaze she held over her daughter told Astrid nothing was for debate. Marriage would be her new goal.

Astrid held her mother's stare, looking murderous. A pause reigned, then Astrid lowered her eyes to the floor.

"And dad agreed?"

She focused on the familiar cracks and crevices in the wood, lines she had long memorized. She suddenly felt suffocated, like the life she had been trying to outrun had finally caught up with her, and with it came the shackles of social niceties that would tie her down for the rest of her life.

She missed Glüm's slow, tentative nod. Perhaps she meant to.

"Aye, he did."

Astrid gave no visible reaction to the muted stab of betrayal. It was silly to be upset at her father. Her mother was right about one thing—this was going to happen someway or another. Of course, her father would want to see her off to a suitable future—it's what fathers do. Of course, he would want to hand her over to another man, another family. Want to give up their late-night talks and early-morning spars—

A blast rocked the house. The pasture fence, just outside the ground-floor window, exploded into
flames. Dirt sprinkled down from the loft above, powdering the unfinished dress and shading two heads of blonde hair. Neither woman paid any heed.

The shouts of Vikings and the bleating of terrified sheep hadn't the chance to penetrate the house's walls before Astrid had an axe in her hand.

"Astrid!" said threateningly. "Astrid, we are not done with this conversation!"

Astrid's strides had already taken her to the door. The words stopped her at the frame. Her lip curled. Trust her mother to prioritize social standing over an occurring dragon raid.

She whirled on the spot and thrust her blade in the direction of the woman, making her second silent vow of the night to never, ever become like her.

"I'm going to prove my worth right now," Astrid swore aloud. "I'll be better off wielding a weapon than...than...arugh! I'd rather die by a dragon than get married!" The last part was bit out rather dramatically. She swung the door open—wider than necessary—and slammed it hard behind her in another theatrical display.

Her cheek would cost her; of this Astrid had no doubts. If she did survive—and she really had no intention of doing anything else—she'd be due for a sore ear and a tongue-lashing before she would be allowed to bunker down in bed.

But it would be worth it.

She leapt over a pile of flaming wood and smashed a Nadder on the head with the flat side of her axe. The dragon staggered back and abandoned the sheep it had been about to fly off.

The handle of Astrid's axe hummed with the reverberation of the blow. Her arms warmed. This was what she was meant to feel—the power of her own strength and competence, not the arms of some man who knew how to bargain.

Fueled by more anger than she knew how to handle, Astrid bellowed a war cry and charged at the dragon to finish the job. It limped back, eyes unfocused as its large head shook the disorientation.

It wouldn't escape her, she would be sure of it. She brought her axe down with another shout, wanting to feel that power again, wanting to feel its blood and its pain and to know she had caused it. For tonight, she wanted to feel like a warrior and nothing but. She wanted to relieve the tight, crushing knot in her chest.

It would be worth it… just for tonight.

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"I'm going to explore the town for a bit!" Hiccup announced as he stretched his arms back beneath the noon sun. He felt rested enough, having slept since they arrived—long before the sun did—and comfortable in his new roomy clothes.

::You always want to explore towns:: Toothless said with his usual, afternoon lethargy. He was kind enough to open his eyes when he addressed Hiccup, but made no motion to leave his sleeping position.
"It's cool! The architecture is always changing, and they'll probably have all sorts of different types of food..."

::Can you speak the French words:: Toothless asked.

Hiccup frowned for a moment, and then shrugged.

"Better than English. Either way, we're still close to Wessex. There have to be plenty of people along the coast who speak lots of languages. It's prime trading territory."

::And when we move to lands where you cannot speak::

"I'll have you beat people into submission for me!" Hiccup smiled brightly. "No talking necessary."

::Sure. That will convince them not to kill me on sight:: Toothless moved his tail so that his good fin covered his eyes. He, at least, was not done resting.

::Be safe. Come back. No fighting. Yadda, yadda, yadda::

Hiccup had to smile at the very human phrase. He forwent a parting salute, knowing it would be lost on Toothless, and marched on towards the shore. From what he remembered last night, if he followed the waterline east he should eventually hit a settlement. He recalled this quite well because his eyes, once deprived of light, seemed drawn to any source afterward—this included candlelit windows rôsts away.

The sun warmed his back whenever it managed to break through the clouds, and the sound of the gently moving surf created a relaxing atmosphere for a midmorning walk. He continued on with a slight limp, recognizing a pulled muscle in his calf. It would be fine in a few days, certainly nothing a little walk would aggravate—

Water hit the side of his face. Again. And while it looked like it could rain any second, Hiccup knew this came from the strait.

"What is up with this channel...?" Hiccup muttered. It didn't seem to matter which coast he was on, something in there didn't like him. And last night...

Last night proved it even unsettled Toothless. Somehow, Hiccup knew whatever he sensed at the docks yesterday, and whatever scared Toothless the night before, was the same thing. Maybe it followed them?

Despite that thought in mind, Hiccup's legs began to bring him closer to the lapping water. Curiosity would be his downfall, but he really, really just needed to know...

He was close enough to the tree line. If worse came to worst, he could always sprint back to Toothless; a pulled muscle wouldn't hinder him enough to get caught.

Hiccup continued to approach, continued to make excuses in his head, mindful of the slippery rocks and strong gusts of wind that picked up the closer he got to the shore. He kept his eyes trained on the water, trying to grasp a sense of oddity or find anything out of place.

He felt like a first class idiot when he couldn't.

"Come on out," Hiccup invited mockingly, knowing he had worked himself up over nothing. "Man... What a waste of—"
The water exploded. A long and gargantuan creature burst from the depths nearly fifty faðmr out to sea, so sudden and so powerfully the resulting spray left Hiccup drenched.

The white-blue, serpentine body extended far above the sea, seeming to be all thick neck and blending with the monochromatic setting. The face was out of place for a giant snake; it had a long, but rounded, snout, decorated with two blowholes, and webbed fans along its jaw line. Rows of spines protruded up two sides of its back, topped by a pair of long and curved horns at the crest of its head. Hiccup didn't know how much more there was to the monster below water—if it had fins or feet—but he couldn't be bothered to drag his eyes away from its head.

Hiccup stood, frozen, soaked, and rooted, and knew its sudden appearance wasn't a coincidence.

A giant lip curled over a long tusk as it surveyed him with filmy, clouded eyes. Hiccup would have thought it blind were it not for the sharp focus it had trained on him. This was it... this was the thing he had sensed earlier. This presence... this power... something about this beast spoke of ancientness.

Hiccup's heart must have lodged in his throat. He couldn't scream or breathe or talk. He couldn't move. He wanted to run—sort of. He knew he was supposed to move, that this was the part where he ran screaming to Toothless, but he couldn't bring himself to turn away. His knees felt locked, and he had no desire to place his back to the sheer magnitude that was this being.

This was a sea serpent. This was something they had not yet encountered in Berk, but would grow on tales of their elusive behavior and their stealthy, underwater method of attack. This was a myth that just decided to pop up to directly address him.

It glided forward with a grace unknown to man and a fluidity born only from the sea. Hiccup couldn't appreciate it, too frozen. The beast lowered its head in a movement so fast for its size that it spurred Hiccup to scramble back.

"Oh shi—" he threw his hands up—whether for protection or to calm the serpent, he didn't know—and closed his eyes.

He recalled that time he tried the dragon mint on the Gronkle, which ended well. Or that time with the wyverns, which didn't.
But Toothless said wyverns were like dragon-rats...This was bigger, and probably just as intelligent as Toothless.

...And probably wasn't going to eat him in one gulp, because he was still alive.

Hiccup peeked one eye open and was greeted with the sight of a giant, flared nostril. Hot air washed over the human and the distinct scent of fish permeated from the dripping scales.

Hiccup straightened, slow and hesitant. He was face to face with a head that was easily five times the height of him.

It stared at him... but made no move to kill him. This was good.

"Hey—" His voice cracked and Hiccup cleared his throat, trying to be rid of the nervousness. "Hi. I..." He took a breath, willing the same calm over his heart that he used with all dragons. The wyverns were a failed experiment, but this creature had yet to attack. In fact, it stilled further when he addressed it.

"I, uh, I'm Hiccup." Introductions were a good start. "You—ah—followed us, didn't you?"

He didn't have any dragon mint with him...would that even work on a sea monster? Were they a type of dragon? Was there a...a...dragon seaweed of sorts that would have the same effect? Hiccup didn't want to get close enough to see if the pressure point worked.

Though in that area he may not have much of a choice. The giant head resumed encroaching on his personal space. Its nostrils flared over and over again, clearly trying to place a scent on him.

"Oh, oh, wait, wait...!" Hiccup stumbled backward, heels catching on rocks. He hadn't fallen yet—a miracle in its own right—but he was beginning to lose his head as the sea dragon's intentions became harder and harder to read. First it was going to eat him, and then it wasn't, and now...

Now its lip was curling back again, showing off the two long fangs as well as the mouth full of serrated teeth. Its pupils constricted into slits and a growl rumbled from its body. Whatever scent it caught on him, it didn't like.

Hiccup forcibly swallowed with a dry throat, unable to tear his eyes away from the stained ivory, even as brackish, putrid breath bombarded him.

"Oh Frigg..." He held his hands out again, fingers shaking slightly. He could salvage this—maybe—it was certainly too late to run—

A heavy force knocked him from the side and sent the sea serpent reeling back with a loud hiss. Hiccup landed on the rocks, scraping his palms on grainy shards.

::HICCUP! Get back to camp!::

Hiccup shook his head and coughed. He looked back. The black dragon stared down the sea monster, teeth extracted and tail swishing. Of everything to notice in that moment, Hiccup noticed how tiny Toothless looked.

"T-Toothless...? What?" Where had he come from? How long had he been here?

It was just like in the forest—Toothless standing between him and danger—only a different setting and a different opponent. Hiccup shakily pulled himself to his feet. He no longer felt in immediate danger now that the monster had retreated back some.
Not that they were safe; Hiccup knew how fast it could move when it wanted to strike.

::It's none of your concern!::

"What?" Hiccup was thoroughly confused. He had yet to do as Toothless commanded, opting to stay just shy of Toothless' rump.

::He wouldn't have hurt you! He's not dangerous!::

Hiccup felt he had to disagree on that last point. Its fangs were longer than his body!

::Oh, you noticed that, did you?::

For one moment longer Hiccup thought Toothless was borderline reading his mind, when he suddenly understood. Toothless wasn't talking to him; he was talking to the sea serpent.

::Well of course he does! He's my human!:: there was a pause and then: ::Clearly::

Toothless' tone had gradually gone from panicked to annoyed and was now verging on sarcastic. Hiccup desperately wished he could understand the sea monster's part of the conversation. Whatever it said aggravated Toothless, and yet its body language did not come off as hostile.

::Absolutely not! Get back to the water! We'll be out of here soon enough!::

Hiccup frowned. Maybe he should make one of those bond-thingies with the sea serpent (not that he knew how). Then they could all have a nice, three-way conversation and he would be able to put in his own two cents. Toothless certainly wasn't the diplomatic sort.

Toothless spun around and head butted Hiccup none too gently in the side, herding him back towards their camp. Hiccup was startled to find the sea monster had actually done as Toothless said and retreated back down into the water.

"Tooth—what—?" He glanced behind him, almost missing the grey crown of the monster amidst the rocky waters. Only the eyes were held above, watching them—him—with a terrifying intensity.

::Move:: Toothless growled. Hiccup got the distinct impression that Toothless's anger spread to more than just the sea serpent.

And he was right. As soon as they were under the cover of the trees, Toothless rounded on him, still with the same, tensed, arched posture he had displayed with the monster.

::What were you thinking?::

The ferocity took Hiccup aback.

"I—I...I just wanted to see—"

::See what? If he was hungry?::

"It turned out fine in the end," Hiccup pointed out, annoyed. "I don't think he intended to eat me."

::Let me guess, you tried to pet it again?::

"I did not!"

::Well you certainly didn't run right away!::
"You don't—"

::I do know that! I know you stayed! I know you tried to make friends—like you always do!::

"I—"

::He could have killed you!:: Toothless continued, not wanting to hear any of Hiccup's excuses. ::Do you even know what that was? What he was capable of?::

Hiccup had a pretty good idea on both accounts. And yet, it hesitated. If anything, it seemed curious.

"But he didn't—" Hiccup began, only to be cut off again by the pacing dragon.

::I wasn't close enough! This is just like last time—you don't think, do you?:

A flock of birds took flight from the treetop above and Hiccup took an involuntary step back. He felt like he was talking to Stoick all over again.

Indignation welled, and with a flushed face he snapped, "You don't have to always protect me! I'm not completely helpless!"

::I DO always have to protect you!:: Toothless roared.

The area was silent for a moment as the two males stared at one other. Toothless was panting, teeth still bared, and to anyone else he would look terrifying, but Hiccup could only feel resentment.

Hiccup nodded. "Right."

He turned from Toothless and began to walk in a direction of their camp.

"Right," he repeated, under his breath.

::Where are you going?::

"To town," Hiccup said shortly, "where you can rest assured I won't be eaten by a sea monster."

Toothless snarled.

::I have to worry about more than sea monsters. You seem to have a talent for trying to get yourself killed! Do you enjoy driving people crazy?:

"Well since it's the only thing I seem to be good at, then yeah!"

He came upon the small clearing they had bunkered down in for the morning and started towards his effects.

::Oh no you don't!::

Before Hiccup could reach his bag he felt the weight of Toothless on him again, this time landing on his shoulders and pinning his body to the ground in a hard tackle.

"Oof!" Hiccup grunted. "What the Hel are you doing?"

::Keeping you in my sight until you are ready to move away from the coast. Why don't you sleep until your clothes dry::
"I just slept," Hiccup snapped, his struggles futile against Toothless' superior strength. His frustration only continued to mount. "Why are you so damned threatened by that thing? It didn't even hurt me! It didn't try! I don't think it was even going to."

::You don't know that::

"Neither do you!"

A moment of silence passed. Hiccup realized Toothless wasn't going to say anything.

"Toothless? Toothless, get off me! At least let me change my clothes!"

Again, the dragon didn't respond. Hiccup knew he wasn't dead; he could feel his chest move with each breath.

"This is so immature!"

::::::

"Dammit Toothless!"

Chapter End Notes

* Art by Fleacollar999
Chapter Summary

Hiccup makes some new… not-so-friends :(

Chapter Notes

There will be THREE languages at one point, accents in abundance—hang tight!

'rgrr' is the hard "r" sound the French make.

It will be italicized even in Norse to help you understand. That being said, Norse is the only language that is NOT italicized. Uh…good luck with that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

While not the first time Hiccup had been subjected to Toothless' crushing weight atop him, never before had it been used as discipline. After a lifetime of uncomfortable struggling, Hiccup settled, and concluded that if he ceased all reaction then Toothless would eventually get restless and move off; experience taught Hiccup that a lack of reaction ends torment much faster than fighting back.

Unfortunately for Hiccup, Toothless was still a creature of the night and therefore experienced no trouble sleeping during the day. This meant Hiccup's only revenge—and subsequent hope of escape—was to keep Toothless uncomfortable by being a bony and awkward bed.

Time passed slowly, each male too stubborn to say anything—neither apologizing nor willing to continue his argument. The tension of their quarrel left the air of their campsight charged and the silence stifling. Despite lying down, the environment made relaxation impossible.

He tried to remain alert, but Hiccup must have spaced out because at some point Toothless' substantial weight lifted from his back. The moment he recognized this, Hiccup cautiously pushed up from the ground, half expecting the dragon to pounce on him again. There was no pain as pulled himself to his feet. No stiffness in his ribs or legs.

Odd, for being lain on by a dragon. Hiccup was used to being roughed up by Toothless from time to time; the dragon was too strong to fully 'pull his punches' when they played. But this time it looked like Hiccup escaped and was unharmed.

Then he saw Gudrid sitting at the base of a tree, watching him, amused.

His face fell.

"Did I fall asleep?"

Her smile widened. "You did fall asleep."

"Dammit." He had been determined not to give in this time. He was still angry with the Night Fury.
"Though I may have pulled a bit on your conscious mind to get you here," Gudrid admitted. And all thoughts of Toothless flew from Hiccup's mind.

"You can do that?" he whispered, not realizing the stark horror expressed on his face. Could she do that while he was flying? Or—or—or bathing?

If she did that, would he arrive before her naked?

Gudrid continued to smile, perhaps understanding where his current thoughts ran, and patted the ground next to her.

"Sit."

Hiccup obeyed with caution. The dream-situation still confused him. She confused him. Only his supernatural understanding of Toothless affirmed his mind hadn't completely snapped.

Once seated, Hiccup was startled to scent linen and dill. He could smell her, as though she were in the physical world and he were not asleep.

And her hair... it looked so soft. The way it fell against her clothes... the way it shined in the dream's light, enticing him to touch it...

He wouldn't touch it, of course. That would be weird and inappropriate...

Then Hiccup's disobedient thoughts strayed to the kiss Gudrid had given him at their last parting. And now here he sat, in close proximity to the young woman, suddenly unable to keep his eyes from straying towards her mouth...the pink lips he remembered as supple and inviting and warm. Lips that parted and moved...

"Worried about Toothless?"

"Ahh—er—yes, yes," Hiccup floundered, darting his eyes up and away from her face in general. He coughed. "Very concerned."

What was wrong with him?

"He's mad," Gudrid stated and she seemed determined to keep the topic serious. Hiccup regained his composure at the sobering reminder.

"Yeah," he concurred, "he is."

Though he had been quite mad himself. At Toothless, at the things he said and they way he reacted, at his own guilt, despite not wanting to feel it.

Gudrid stroked the end of her braid and watched him in her unnerving way.
"You saw how the wyverns reacted to you," she reminded him. "And Toothless warned you about trying to make friends with beasts you do not understand. Yet you did the same thing again. Why?"

Hiccup shrugged, eyes trained on the clean stitching of his new shoes. He felt the heat of her stare against the side of his face and decided to answer.

"Well, it wasn't a wyvern," he defended. "I just... I had to try, I guess. I mean, I can't just treat every creature the same, and I can't expect they'll act the same..."

Not once during his brief stint as the dragon-trainee prodigy did Hiccup stride into the training arena with confidence. He always feared the dragon mint wouldn't work on anything other than a Night Fury, or that Nadders had a different pressure point than other dragons since their heads were so much bigger in proportion to their bodies. Every time, every day, he put himself out on a limb—with witnesses to spare—and hoped for the best. It was how he always performed experiments; no one beside himself really cared if he came out unscathed or not...with the possible exception of Gobber and Stoick.

But they reacted to his misfortune in more of a "it's good for you" sort of way.

"Right," Gudrid said after a brief silence, perhaps she allowed it so he could collect his thoughts, or so she could review them herself. "You did as you felt you had to do. And you felt you had to give the sea serpent a chance."

Her agreement to his reasoning should have made him feel better. It didn't.

"But Toothless...he's never been that mad at me before," Hiccup said. He rubbed his arm, suddenly chilled. "Not even with the wyverns. Heh... I guess I got leniency that time for being ignorant." His eyes strayed back to his shoes. Now that the heat of the moment had passed and his indignation subdued, his previously, self-righteous standpoint felt surprisingly hollow. With eyes still averted, he continued in a softer voice, "He probably expected me to learn my lesson that time. And when I didn't...I could feel his...his..."

Disappointment.

Hiccup had to consciously keep himself from curling inward as he placed Toothless' reaction. He should have recognized the expression when he saw it, having seen it almost all of his life. Perhaps
he was too used to it only on human faces—namely his father's. And now he had given the one person who had ever believes in him a reason to doubt him.

No matter how far he flew, how high he climbed the skies, he would never escape Hiccup the Useless. It's who he was. Changing his name and clothes and location couldn't change that.

"He was scared," Gudrid said before Hiccup could work himself into a depression.

"He was—"

"Scared," Gudrid stressed. "His instincts were aligned with his emotions, and it may have amplified his reaction to seeing you face off with a sea serpent."

Hiccup shook his head and rubbed the heel of his palm into his temple.

"I don't understand..."

"Sea serpents and dragons are natural rivals," Gudrid explained gently. She perceived that Hiccup's own emotional distress had left him less inclined to work things out in his mind. "One rules the sky and the other, the sea. It has been this way since the beginning of time for them, long before Man walked Midgard. They have an aversion to one another that is ingrained in their instincts."

Hiccup furrowed his brow and asked, "That's just the way it is? They hate each other because it's natural? No other reason like...revenge or defense...or...?"

The völdr shook her head.

"No reasons that would arouse human wars, at any rate. Though it may have something to do with the 'all-eel' diet sea serpents tend to have," Gudrid said with a slight grin. Hiccup had to smile as well, his spirits slightly lifted.

"Yeah, what is up with that?"

"Eels secrete a toxin in their pores; its smell is noxious to dragons."

Hiccup wondered if Gudrid knew everything. If he had two sources of untapped, amazing knowledge.

He thought back to all the times Toothless encountered eel—the way he would jerk back, nose twitching, followed by sharp head shakes and a hasty retreat. He reacted much in the same way Hiccup would if he were confronted with the smell of a rotting corpse.

"Just the smell?" Hiccup asked to clarify.

"Just the smell," Gudrid reaffirmed.

"Interesting..." That was going in the journal, which was getting pretty full now that he thought about it. "So Toothless found his enemy with me and...what? Was it a jealousy issue?"

"He would have been far more angry and less scared if that were the case, do you not think?" Gudrid replied and Hiccup found he was inclined to agree. Toothless could be possessive and overprotective, but he wouldn't have a fit over something as trivial as jealousy.

"That sea serpent found a human who smelled like a Night Fury and was, well, boggled," Gudrid said with a shrug. "It showed an interest in you—enough to follow you across the English Channel—and to Toothless... that translated as an interest in killing a human who smelled like a dragon."
Hiccup sighed and knocked his head back against the tree trunk.

"So it probably *would* have killed me. Toothless was right...of course."

"Toothless is not right about everything," Gudrid remarked. "You are a human. Would you consider yourself an expert on every human's reaction?"

"I could guess pretty accurately," Hiccup said, thinking of how any human with a blade would react to Toothless. For the sake of the dragon's safety, Hiccup had to assume every human *would* treat Toothless as a Viking would.

More and more, he began to understand Toothless' actions as fear.

"So what's this all about?" Hiccup finally asked. He gestured to the replica setting of where his actual body lay. "It's not just to tell me about sea serpents, is it? Do I get another bond perk? The bond of loggerheads, maybe?"

Gudrid looked like she would very much like to smack him upside the head. Hiccup thought she might not be one for sarcasm.

Instead Gudrid sat straighter and crossed her hands in her lap primly.

"You are at a point in your journey where the decisions you make will have a greater and greater impact on your destiny," she answered.

"I thought that's the case for every decision in everyone's destiny?" Hiccup was quick to point out.

Gudrid nodded. "True, but *your* destiny is going to affect far more than most. I am going to help direct you to the right choices—but direct only, and with very little influence. You, Hiccup, already know the right decisions. You make them every day without realizing."

"I am in complete disagreement with you there," Hiccup said and he refused to be cowed by the hard look she responded with. He made one bad decision after another and he would be the first to attest to it.

"You felt that you could trust a sea serpent not to kill you," Gudrid said, her eyes brightening, her voice impassioned with belief. "You had never met one before, it scared you, but you felt you could communicate with it as a sentient being. After knowing why Toothless was so against you interacting with the sea serpent, does this opinion change?"

Hiccup frowned, but he took the time to find an honest answer. He could tell this meant a lot to her...

"No," he drew out slowly. "I understand Toothless, but...I still believe it didn't want to kill me."

Gudrid looked inordinately pleased.

"I know. Never stop believing in the good in others. It is often a danger, but most definitely a strength, Hiccup. Not a weakness."

Hiccup favored her with a wry grin. "I'll try to remember that when I get my ass kicked for being a sissy."

She giggled—one of the few times she did when he was being snide—and reached out a hand to brush his bangs away from his eyes. Hiccup was amazed to find he could feel the warmth she radiated. The tingle of her fingers against his brow.
Some dream.

"Your hair is growing longer," she mused. She pinched a lock of auburn strands, but she wasn't looking at his hair.

Hiccup tightened his jaw to keep from swallowing (anything to avoid revealing how nervous he felt), and focused on figuring out how she had gotten so close to his body rather than the clear, grey eyes that searched his face. They weren't grey like the clouded skies had been the last couple days. They were the grey that reflected off a wolf's silver back in the full moon's light, or the darkened glimmer of snow in the earliest light of the morning.

He felt her hand move from his hair to his ear, to his neck, and back up to his cheek. She turned it so her knuckles now brushed against the rough skin, chafed from cold and wind and sparse hair.

Gudrid sighed, somehow looking enamored and forlorn all at once.

"I fear you'll ruin me for all other men."

Hiccup fought the impulse to spring back, just barely keeping in contact as he gasped, "W-what?"

The völdr smiled that same, worldly smile she often wore for him. "I think you will find that, more often than not, taking the plunge will bring you to treasure. Keep your thoughts crazy."

Hiccup shook his head, though barely, for he didn't want to dislodge her hand. Was she going to kiss him again? Or was she just going to touch his face?

How sad was it that the farthest he'd gone with a girl was in his mind?

"Why are you so cryptic?" he mumbled. "Is it a warden thing?"

Gudrid giggled.

"It is a woman thing."

########

Hiccup jerked at the sound of metal clanging against metal.

It grated on his ears; helping bring to attention how annoyed he felt being awake, alone, and somehow left hanging.

Then he remembered that Toothless didn't make 'metal-on-metal' noises.

He pushed himself to his knees and wearily adjusted his gaze to his surroundings.

Apparently, Toothless had the ability to shape-shift into a dozen dispassionate looking Frenchmen—complete with ridiculously bright, yellow and red tunics (Hiccup fought the urge to squint), chain-mail head coverings, and lots of sharp, pointy weapons ripe for impaling.

That or Toothless was nearby, stooped silently in a tree and looking for an excuse to bounce some pompous Flemish butts against tree trunks.

Wow, Hiccup was actually surrounded by pompous, Flemish butts.
Hiccup banked on the latter. Despite feeling more exposed and vulnerable than he had in a long time, the former Viking sent silent thanks to the gods for Toothless respecting his wishes of keeping a low profile.

One of the men stepped forward; his tunic was adorned with intricately detailed borders, the cross-like crest upon his chest more elaborate than the rest of the group's. He was clearly the richest, the leader, or both.

"DEBOUT! DEBOUT!" He barked, jerking his drawn sword upwards. "Une source sûre t'a vu donner des ordres à la Gargouille!"

Hiccup quickly scrambled to his feet, discreetly pressing his forearm to his side in the process to make sure he was still armed with his dagger. Not that it would do him much good in such a scenario.

"I..." He faltered, mind racing. He knew French—though his late grandfather, Old Wrinkly, had taught it to him and he hadn't spoken it fluently since the man's death, nearly a decade ago...

Hiccup tried to decipher the words.

Get up? Well, he did that. He was... seen? Heard? Something about a thing... heard with a... a thing...?

The colorful man heaved a loud sigh.

"Ugh, why are you in my country if you do not—ugh. No matter. English, it is, 'o courgrse," he said in English, his face unchanged. "We are here on the steep that you were seen conversing with the Gargouille."

Hiccup exhaled through his nose. The English would be just as hard...

"Tee water...monster?" he struggled. Perhaps Gargouille was the French word for sea serpent? His grandfather hadn't taught him that one...

The man, along with several others who probably understood English, exchanged looks. Hiccup found their faces all remarkably similar, and with their hair covered by the strange hoods, it would be hard to tell them apart if they started moving around.

With the exception of the rich leader. And his fancy cross.

"Euh. Not your first language, Ees eet boy?" the leader asked, again in English.

If understanding English was hard when the English spoke it, it was harder when someone with a completely different accent spoke it. Hiccup squinted through the harsh 'r's and throaty noises.

"I v—er, Norse?"

The man rolled his eyes, exaggerating the gesture to convey his exasperation with having to deal with Hiccup at all.

"Feegurgres. I should 'ave known by dze shoes."

Hiccup blinked rapidly.

"You, uh, speak?"
The Frenchman looked as though Hiccup had greatly insulted his intelligence.

"O' courgrse I speak, you leetle fool. My grgreatest nehm-eh-sees speaks dzis language. And eef dzere ees one dzeeng I prgride mysehf on, eet ees knowing dzy ehnehmy."

Hiccup swallowed at the intensity in which this man seemed to say anything.

"Oh...okay."

"I am Arnulf de Flandres. Per'aps you 'ave 'eard of meh?" Arnulf paused. Hiccup got the impression he was posing.

"Dze Count of Flandehrs?"

"..."

"Arnulf dze Grgread?"

Hiccup's face remained blank. Arnulf tried not to look too put out.

"Euh. Well, you argre one of dzose savagehs, so I can undergrstand yourgr eeg-noh-rance," he dismissed.

Hiccup maintained his silent, though he felt the stirrings of irritation cross his face. This wasn't the first time he had been referred to unfavorably for being a Norseman, but that didn't help him tolerate it any better.

Arnulf cleared his throat, "Rgright, back to buzeeness. La Gargouille." He sheathed his sword, though it hardly put Hiccup at ease.

"What about it?" Hiccup asked shortly.

"You wergre seen speaking to eet."

Crap.

"I...that is...I can't speak to it. That's ridiculous. But it didn't eat me!" Hiccup chuckled nervously.

"Pretty lucky there. Boy, was that a close call."

Perceiving no facial response from any other man in the group, Hiccup came to the conclusion that only Arnulf spoke Norse. The Count's eyes narrowed.

"Do not lie to me, boy!" Arnulf snapped. His outburst in aggression spurred his men to shift their hands towards their weapons. "Dze beast lets none leev! Now I know you spoke to eet—beh-weetched eet—"

"No," Hiccup was quick to deny. "No, really—"

"Argre you a soh-eh-rgrerr?"

"No—"

"Any odz-eh-wohldy sway ovehrgr dze sea and eets mystehrgries?"

"No."
"Surgrely, you argre not a god!"

"What? No!"

Hiccup's annoyance with the man morphed into panic as the pressure mounted. Even after his talk with Gudrid, he couldn't keep silent the disparaging thought that, when stripped of his dragon bodyguard, he was still Hiccup the Useless. He couldn't handle the situation...

Arnulf continued to look at Hiccup like one would look at an annoying obstacle to a very much-anticipated goal.

"Why don't I tell you a storgry, leettle boy?" Arnulf sneered, and Hiccup realized not even Astrid could perfect the expression as well as the Count had. "One about a vehgry sought aftehr treasure. Eet was bhought to dzese seas many, many yeargs ago by a vehgry wehll travehlled pirg rate and dzen snatched from 'eem by dze maw of dze beast. Eet took dzis treasure—a mageecal place un-heachable to 'umans—and still seets dzere to dzees day, photehcted by location and guarded by la Gargouille."

He fixed his eyes on Hiccup. They were dark, alighted only by greed. Hiccup shifted under the intensity and tried to bring himself some comfort by guessing at the direction Toothless hid in.

"Okay. Well...thanks for that story. It was a good one." He took a tiny step back. And then another. "One of the best."

Maybe he could make a break for the woods.

Arnulf's sword was out in a flash and thrust forward, just inches from Hiccup's Adam's apple. Hiccup stilled, both out of self-preservation and to listen for the sound of Toothless bounding through the trees.

"You weel geht me dzat ah-tee-fact," Arnulf commanded.

As much as Hiccup hated the situation of having a weapon at his neck, he hated being bullied more.

"How?" he growled with an attitude he never thought he could muster in such a situation.

"Conveence dze beast to rehleenqueesh eet." Arnulf countered. "Use your powers of commune—"

"I have no powers!" Hiccup roared, slapping the sword from his throat with the back of his wrist. Arnulf responded with a quick step forward and a strong backhand. Hiccup staggered from the blow, but managed to keep his footing.

Stay Toothless, stay! He thought desperately.

His cheek stung, it would probably bruise, and Hiccup suddenly felt a new contempt for the French. Still, he didn't want to blow his cover just yet. He could get out of this without starting rumors across the land of the dragon-boy—he had to. Otherwise his dearly coveted freedom would be severely hindered.

Hiccup waited for the disaster of Toothless bursting through the trees—he waited for what felt like an eternity—but by the time Arnulf lowered his hand, Hiccup knew that Toothless understood the silent message.

Hiccup straightened, refusing to touch his face or show any such weakness. He scowled at the taller
"Give me to tomorrow," he bit out. The scathing he felt on his tongue helped keep his mind from his hammering heart. He didn't want anyone to know of his tension.

His priority was getting the French away. He needed to talk to Toothless.

Arnulf did not look joyous at the small victory. He seemed the type of man who wasn't asked to wait very often.

"And tomor...row you well 'ave my treasure?"

Tomorrow he'd be halfway to Germany on the back of a dragon.

"Yes," Hiccup answered shortly.

Arnulf shouted something in French over his shoulder—again, too fast and accented for Hiccup to pick up—and snapped his fingers. A couple of men jumped at the cue and moved to grab Hiccup's pack.

The pack that had his notebook, his clothes, his harness—

Arnulf smiled at Hiccup's ill-concealed distress.

"Just to ensure that you do not think of running off," the Count explained. "Allons-y!"

The men began their unified march back to wherever they came from. Several cast Hiccup looks as they passed, all ranging from interest to disdain, before they disappeared into the trees.

Hiccup kept his feet rooted to his spot as his belongings were carted off toward the dirt road he knew to be several fathom away. He'd get it back. Eventually.

Knowing this didn't stop him from feeling numb at the encounter. Numb and cold and powerless and useless.

Chapter End Notes

Bet you all got excited by that title, didn't you? Dirty perverts...

I am truly sorry for the crossed eyes I may have caused during the Arnulf scene. Special thanks to Valvole for the French translations!

Next chapter: Make-ups, bonding, and more bromance-silliness on our boys' parts.
Silence filled the forest for only a moment before the brush rustled once more. Toothless slunk out of the darkness like a jungle cat, the saddle dangling from his mouth.

Relief warmed Hiccup, both at the sight of the dragon and at Toothless' forethought to hide the saddle with him. Finding that among his belongings would have raised excessive questions—and the less he heard Arnulf's voice, the better.

Toothless spat the saddle from his mouth. His pupils were slit, nostrils flared, and his movements jerky, as though he still fought with himself to keep from running after the Frenchmen.

::Are you okay?: the Night Fury pressed, he sounded as agitated as his movements. He brought his face up to Hiccup's and sniffed at the human's cheek. Hiccup's hair fluttered at the, the ends brushing the throbbing area.

Hiccup nodded before he spoke. "Yeah."

::Do you want to go get your stuff?:

Hiccup shook his head. Though anticipated, Toothless looked put out

"One spoke Norse," Hiccup mumbled, detached. "He said his nemesis spoke it... so his nemesis must be a Norseman. He's probably used to fighting Vikings... and that means there's a chance they know how to fight dragons. I don't want to take that chance. I can get this treasure..."

Hiccup rubbed a hand down his face and lingered over the bruised jawbone that took the brunt of the blow. The farther south he got, the fewer Viking-sized men he encountered... but, despite lacking the stature of a Viking, that thrice-damned Frenchmen hit like one.

Or maybe it stung more because he didn't fight back. Not physically.

::Hiccup?: Toothless crooned, staying close to the human. ::Hiccup what's wrong? We will get your stuff back. I don't care if they can fight dragons or not—I can still take them::

"Yes you can," Hiccup agreed softly. "But I can't."

Toothless' brow lowered. The plates on the side of his face twitched. Concern left his shoulders and wings tight. Culpability, solicitude... things he very rarely used to feel towards others.

Hiccup had that affect on him.

::Hiccup... is this about what I said to you earlier? You must know I was speaking out of fear—:

"I know," Hiccup cut him off, having already heard it from Gudrid. "You're scared that I'm going to get myself killed one day because I always bite off more than I can chew." And it was a very sensible fear. "But you can't keep fighting my battles, Toothless."

Toothless sat back, beginning to identify with Hiccup's earlier indignation during their argument.
::I won't:: Toothless assured him. ::You're getting better. You're great with the little blade. And you're fast::

Despite the words of encouragement, Hiccup couldn't help but feel the sting of patronization.

"Yeah, that's me," Hiccup snorted. "Great at running away."

Toothless rolled his eyes at the self-deprecating comment.

::Even if you were the most skilled warrior of your human-drove, you would not have been able to defeat all those men::

Hiccup held his initial retort about underestimating Berk's warriors and instead chose to address Toothless' earlier claim.

"And yet, you could."

::I'm a dragon:: Toothless stressed.

Hiccup's fervor promptly vanished—he had been waiting for that—and he gave the dragon a sad smile.

"Exactly," he conceded. "You know... we're raised to believe that dragons are beasts—the humans, I mean. That you're lower than us. Incapable of thought. But the reality is..." He gingerly touched his face again and closed his eyes. "The reality is that I'll never equal up to you."

It was something he had begun to realize during his first couple of weeks in the Night Fury's company. There was so much more to dragons than what history taught. It was one thing to have superior bodies, but dragons had intelligence on their side too. And longevity. And no constraints on transportation.

They were the superior species.

"No matter how hard I train or how much I learn, I feel like I'd drag you down in everything," Hiccup admitted. He gave a short, empty laugh. "I mean, here you are—a Night Fury—and you're hiding in the trees from a few humans just to humor me! Being around me is practically degrading for you!"

Toothless' shoulders sagged. ::Hiccup...::

"I can train all I want, but I'll never be as fast or as powerful or...or as capable as you. I have nothing to offer to a dragon. Except for your flight. And even that won't be dependent on me forever."

Toothless looked at his human with pity and shock, shaking his head in disbelief at what he was hearing.

::Hiccup, you have something I could never have!::

Hiccup scoffed. "What? Opposable thumbs?"

Toothless lashed at the back of Hiccup head with his tail.

::Listen to me!:: he snapped ::You are completely underestimating the human mind! Yes, I have thousands of years of instincts ingrained in my being without even having to experience them. I know what is and what is not, in this world. I know a lot, but that is all I know. I cannot...I can't...::
Toothless looked frustrated, like he was trying to find the right word.

::You can see what could be. Like it...appears in your head. Human magic. I cannot do that::

Hiccup's lips tugged into half a smile. "You mean... imagination? Sure you can. It's... it's not something that can be controlled or stopped. It's just there."

Toothless appeared grave.

::No Hiccup. It may be something you stop help, because you are gifted with more of it than I have ever seen in any human. But when my tailfin was taken from me, I knew it would be Spells before it returned—and too many spells. I know it would be near impossible to survive grounded. I knew I had met my fate. I knew this and I accepted it. That's why I did not struggle when you were set to kill me. My instincts dictated that there was no other way...and no cleaner way to go.

::But you... You looked at such a finite sentence and saw possibilities. Dragons do not have that ability. We do not have the power to create unknowns. We are creatures of tradition. And considering how we are both breaking tradition for both our kind, that is the greatest asset we can have. I am following your lead::

Incredibly heartened, Hiccup bit his lip to try a keep the smile off his face. He failed when Toothless gently head-butted him in the stomach. Hiccup's arms wrapped around dragon's head in a brief, meaningful hug.

As long as Toothless didn't think of him as Hiccup the Useless, he would be happy.

"Really?" he asked haltingly.

::Yep::

"I could lead us straight into Hel, for all we know," Hiccup warned.

::Sounds like a good time to me:: Toothless quipped back. ::And, because of you, I am going to be breaking records everywhere: first to have a rider, first to grow back a tailfin—first to fly with only one tail fin. I think your road to madness will only bring us good things::

In a wily maneuver, Toothless lifted his head and gave Hiccup a heavy lick to his abused cheek.

"Ugh!"

But Hiccup laughed through his dislike of licking.

::I will, however, have to destroy the man who hit you::

"Yeah, yeah. You'll get your fun..."

Hiccup rubbed the saliva from his face, though the quickly cooling liquid soothed the pain.

As his hand touched his cheek for the untold time that day, he was reminded of a different touch his face recently felt.

"Treasure..." he whispered. Surely, she wasn't being literal!

::Yeah, that's something we can still avoid. We'll just do some more sneaking around, like that time with the pirates:: Toothless, not privy to Hiccup's thoughts, decided. ::They shouldn't be too hard to
"Then again, she said plunge..." Hiccup continued to mutter under his breath. "What were her exact words, again?"

Toothless' ears perked.

::She?::

"Gudrid."

The ears fell back down. ::The vördr?:

"Yup."

Toothless snorted. ::I should have known. I tried to wake you when the humans approached, but nothing worked. And then that scent came. The one I am beginning to associate her...::

Hiccup snapped to attention.

"Scent? What scent?"

Toothless wrinkled his nose in both thought and distaste.

::It is like a... like what males emit when trying to attract a mate::

"What!" Hiccup yelped. His collar suddenly felt hot. "N-no, no! You probably got it confused with...interest! Like the educational kind..."

He trailed off at Toothless' deadpan look.

"It's her fault!" Hiccup exploded. "She's the one who keeps touching me—!"

Toothless reared back.

::I do not need to hear this!::

Hiccup began waving his hands in the air. "Not like that!"

::Just tell me why she appeared to you again:: Toothless interjected. ::And leave out all touching::

Hiccup grimaced when he realized there was nothing he could say to save face at the moment.

"She had something to tell me... mostly about the decisions I've been making. She said they were... well, she said they were the right ones." He might be leading them right to Hel but Gudrid at least gave him a thumbs up for it. "And, I think...I..."

Something niggled the back of his mind—had been for sometime, now that he thought about it. In that moment, as he stood between Toothless and the ocean with his cheek throbbing, it blossomed into an idea.

The treasure Arnulf wanted... the place no human could reach... the serpent...

"...I think I understand where she was trying to guide me!"

Toothless warily watched as Hiccup's face moved through several familiar expressions.
::I do not like what you are thinking right now:: Toothless informed him.

Hiccup scoffed. The wonder receded from his expression. "You can't hear me think!"

Toothless gave him a flat look.

::I can see it in your face:: he said. ::You're thinking of something that is going to upset me::

Hiccup had to grant him that.

"Well...among other things, Gudrid did help me understand why you were so mad earlier—and I get it! I do!—but she also made me realize that I should not stop trying to communicate with the sea serpent..."

::Yes. This is absolutely upsetting me::

"And that's where you come in!" Hiccup supplied cheerfully.

Toothless looked very much like he would like to slap himself in the forehead if he had the body for it.

::Hiccup, that is a sea serpent. They're...they're disgusting, tainted, slimy beasts!::

Hiccup raised his eyebrows. "Is it because they smell of eel?"

::That and I want to melt its greasy skin off every time it pops its deformed head into the air::

Hiccup stared.

::Can't help it:: Toothless shrugged.

"Yeah..." Hiccup said, slowly. "Gudrid explained that to me—your natural hatred for sea serpents. But really I think this is one that can be reasoned with! Which is why I need you to act as a translator," he finished with a pleading look at his best friend.

Toothless sneered, ::The vördr should have explained to you how I would rather bathe in eel blood::

Unwilling to be deterred, Hiccup tried to mediate.

"Look, we'll approach the shore with me on your back so we can fly off at a moment's notice. But only if it comes to that." When Toothless continued his unyielding glare Hiccup added, "You said you were following my lead here! I need you to trust me on this."

The dragon deflated some, though more so out of reluctance than regret.

::Why can't you just walk away from this:: Toothless implored.

Hiccup threw his hands in the air. "I can't! My—my mind won't let me! The same way I couldn't leave you flightless."

Toothless huffed at the comparison. ::Low::

Hiccup winced. "Look, I know you're not comfortable with this, but I really, truly feel that this needs to be done. I don't understand—not yet, that is. But Gudrid said something about treasure, and then Arnulf wants some treasure, and we meet the sea serpent who just happens to be guarding this treasure... we'd have to be trying to ignore the signs."
"When the signs are pointing to your imminent death, it's time to start ignoring them."

"No one is going to die!" Hiccup shouted. Toothless' obstinacy exhausted him.

"Because no one is going back to that shoreline," the dragon resolved.

"Why am I here?"

Toothless directed his question at the heavens. He didn't want to look ahead of him, at the span of salt water housing that snake, nor did he want to look at the human on his back—the one responsible for this most unfortunate situation.

"Because you love me," Hiccup answered, patting Toothless in a placating manner.

"Loathe," Toothless corrected. "I loathe you."

"This will turn out fine. You'll see." Hiccup cleared his throat and raised his voice to the channel, "Erm, sea serpent? Uh... I'd—we'd—like to talk to you."

Toothless snorted at the wording and curled his lips back.

"Get out here you slimy, fork-tongued, water guzzler. I can smell your rank stench befouling the air."

"Be nice," Hiccup murmured. He didn't want to blow his chance of figuring this out just because Toothless' irritation scared off their ticket to the treasure.

Though a far less impressive entrance than before, Hiccup felt even greater disquiet at the proximity and stealth managed by a creature of such gargantuan proportions.

"Right..." he mumbled. He felt unable to tear his eyes away from the serpent's—once more, locked in an uneven staring match. The serpent's penetrating gaze never wavered from the odd human boy and Hiccup helpless to match its intensity.

Hiccup felt the body beneath him tense. Toothless's frame vibrated with a nonstop growl, ready to spring into the air with the next move made by the sea monster.

"Is he saying anything?" Hiccup asked quietly while leaning forward towards Toothless' ears. He kept his face turned toward the serpent.

"Yes." Toothless answered shortly. "He is really interested in the saddle you are on."

Hiccup's lips quirked with a flash of a grin. "Can he understand me?"

"He is ancient... he can probably understand anything." Toothless muttered back.
Hiccup got the impression that, despite the dragon's hatred for the sea monster, Toothless still did not want the age comment heard. Apparently, fear of the elderly transcended all matters of dislike.

With this thought in mind, Hiccup sat up straighter.

"Hi," he greeted the sea serpent clearly. "I'm Hiccup... oh wait, I already introduced myself earlier, didn't I? Sorry. This is Toothless," Toothless emitted a charming snarl, "and we'd like your help."

A moment of silence passed; the serpent continued to stare at Hiccup, unblinking.

::He is willing to hear you out:: Toothless said grudgingly. Hiccup's smile widened.

It was a start.

"Great. Uh, well, there's this treasure we need to get—but it's not for us! It's for some French guy who took my stuff. It's not really about that either. Okay, so, I had a dream...and it involves destiny and a vördr and all this stuff that's actually way over my head—"

The sea serpent continued its passivity, Toothless continued to knead the sand with his claws, and Hiccup realized he might be rambling.

"Uh, the point is, we were told you guarded this treasure. I don't really have the details but...apparently you took it from a pirate? And you guard it in a 'magical lair' that humans can't reach? Any...any of this ringing a bell?"

The confidence Hiccup felt when he first addressed the serpent had waned some; he felt rather foolish asking a monster if it remembered a specific treasure it may have.

::No::

Hiccup jolted at Toothless' admission.

"Huh?"

::He does not have the treasure::. The disappointment Hiccup felt was almost enough to keep him from noticing Toothless' own peak in curiosity. The dragon had even stopped growling. ::He said he knows what treasure you are talking about, but he's not the one who took it, and he's not the one who guards it::

Hiccup let out a breath he didn't know he held, eyes wide.

"Could...could you get it for us?" Hiccup asked the giant head. He bit his lip, hope wriggled in his gut.

::No:: Toothless said again. ::He himself can't get it. They would not relinquish it to him...but they would likely allow you to have it. However... they do not leave the cavern::

"Cavern?" Hiccup asked, "The place unreachable to humans?"

::It is located on the floor of the ocean, too deep for any human to swim. Also—humph!::

"Dragons can't reach it either, can they?" Hiccup guessed correctly.

::Perhaps not myself:: Toothless reluctantly admitted. ::But there are certainly other dragons that have the aptitude::
"I know, I know..." Hiccup patted the side of Toothless' neck. He worked the predicament over in his mind.

The treasure was underwater—too far for him or Toothless to reach. The sea serpent could reach it, but whatever guarded it wouldn't give the treasure up to the serpent. But it might give it to him. But he couldn't reach it...

The sea serpent could reach it, but he couldn't.

He could get the treasure, but the sea serpent couldn't.

The sea serpent could reach it...

"Toothless...I'm getting off you now."

Toothless jerked at Hiccup's announcement. ::What!::

Hiccup hopped off before Toothless could pull a stunt that would make everything impossible.

"He's not going to eat me! Right?" Hiccup directed at the serpent. The usual vulnerability of having both feet on the ground settled, but a stimulating trill ran up his spine at his nearness to such a great beast.

Toothless started growling again, his legs tensing as if ready to grab his human (with his teeth if he had to) and bolt.

"Toothless..." Hiccup warned.

::I don't believe him!::

"But I do! Now please, please, bear with me for this," Hiccup begged. He held Toothless' gaze until the dragon begrudgingly nodded.

Hiccup took a deep breath, steeling himself, and faced the serpent.

"Can you bring me to this cavern?" he asked it.

Both the serpent and dragon had, funnily, similar initial reactions—bemusement. The sea serpent's head cocked a fraction to the side, possibly wondering how it would manage this, before its eyes widened marginally.

::What?:: Toothless sounded confused. ::How would he do that if its under—Oh no! No!::

Toothless dived at Hiccup, teeth out, clearly intent on yanking Hiccup back to the trees as fast as possible. Hiccup anticipated this. He nimbly dodged the muzzle, dancing out of reach and closer to the monstrous head positioned on the shore.

::Hiccup! Get back here!:: Toothless barked, looking rather ferocious with his thinned pupils and thrashing tail.

Feeling daring, Hiccup stepped closer to the serpent.

"What did he say?" the boy demanded.

::Hiccup!: the dragon roared.
"What did he say?"

Toothless held his tongue a moment longer with a rather sour expression on his face once he realized his continued refusal to comply would only drive Hiccup closer to the snake.

::He's willing, but—:

"And he won't eat me?" Hiccup asked more for Toothless' benefit than his own.

::So he says:: Toothless answered with a threatening growl towards the sea serpent. ::Do you understand what you're doing?::

Hiccup looked to horned jaws of the serpent—just a few arm-lengths away at this point—and at the stained, towering fangs that could not fully be contained by the scaly lips. At the skull—the size. He'd seen houses smaller.

"This will work," he declared and took a breath, swelling with confidence—false or otherwise.

::How do you know?: Toothless' fierce anger had begun to deflate and now the tendrils of anxiety threaded his words.

"Gudrid said it would," Hiccup said as if that would explain everything. She worked for the Gods, after all. He continued his light steps towards the slowly opening mouth. The beast showed no caution to his approach, no threat. Hiccup knew it would not deceive him; a creature as grand as this would not stoop to something so human.

::Gud—:: Toothless shook his head, incredulous. ::The woman in your head told you to climb into a sea serpent's mouth? ...And you're listening to her?::

Hiccup laughed just as he reached the body. He had to take a moment to revel at his current situation—standing alongside a legendary myth. He gently touched the scales of its lips. They were cool and wet and overly smooth—like an algae covered rock.

He looked back at his dragon.

"I need you to trust me," he said softly. He really did hate upsetting Toothless this much; but the dragon was so influenced by instincts he was practically unable to give the sea serpent any benefit.

::I do trust you but...:: Toothless' eyes were large with alarm. He still debated suffering the putridity of the snake, if just to forcibly drag Hiccup away from all this. ::This is the craziest thing you've done to date, and that terrifies me::

Hiccup chuckled again, taking his hand from the scales.

"This one time," he began in mock story mode, "I climbed on the back of a Night Fury's tail—"

::Hiccup...::

"—and I ended up finding my best friend and changing my life for the better."

::This one time:: Toothless countered, ::you climbed into a sea serpent's mouth...and it ate you!::

"He already promised not to eat me." Hiccup looked up into the enormous, filmy eye. Its pupil could be the size of his arm. "Right?"

The sea serpent made a huffing-like noise and some water sprayed from the blowhole between its
eyes. Hiccup took this as a 'yes'.

Toothless appeared pained with the words he uttered next.

::If this is what you feel you have to do...then I will go along with it::

It was all Hiccup needed to hear. He placed a foot between two of the serpent's teeth, mindful not to slip on any of the seaweed caught within crevices, and levered himself up. The air inside the giant mouth was stifling and Hiccup had to shallow his breathing to keep from gagging. Hopefully, the ride wouldn't be a long one.

::But if you die...:: Toothless added, his threatening tone directed at Hiccup rather than the snake. ::If you die I will go into the nearest human settlement and I will bite the head off of every human child I come across::

Hiccup stared at him, still halfway into the sea serpent's mouth.

::Let that be on your head:: Toothless said resolutely.

Hiccup gave him a faint smile and finished his climb into the slimy, odorous orifice, making himself comfy on a thick, grey tongue.

"And you said you weren't creative."

The jaws closed.

Chapter End Notes

And so Hiccup rides off to the treasure in a sea serpent's mouth—in true Hiccup fashion. Normally the pressure that far deep into the water would be to much for a human to
handle, but sea serpents are protected by their mystical magic to keep their own heads from exploding...which would protect Hiccup as well. My story, my rules!

This is actually one of a few mini-adventures Hiccup will go on in his entire journey.

The scent Toothless referred to when describing Hiccup and Gudrid was pheromones. Pubescents will be Pubescents!
Chapter Summary

Hiccup meets what guards the treasure. It's not what he expected.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Finned

Some might think travelling underwater in the mouth of a sea serpent as cool. Some revel in the sheer daring it takes to willingly climb over monstrous teeth and sit on a reeking, slippery muscle. Some might self-congratulate for concocting such a clever and original plan to reach famously untouchable grounds.

Some, clearly, have never been in Hiccup's position before, who spent the majority of his discomfiting ride focusing on not throwing up from the suffocating, rank breathing air provided for him. Call him paranoid, but puking in a sea monster's mouth did not seem like a good way to keep from being accidentally swallowed. Or spit out rôsts into the ocean where his head would pop off.

The trip extended far, far longer than Hiccup anticipated. After spending an inordinate amount of time in the odious mouth, Hiccup came to the conclusion that he much preferred flying to this. In the sky he had fresh air, he could see, and he wasn't coated in fetid mucus.

The bone of the sea serpent's skull must have been extremely dense, for not only did it survive the untold pressure at the ocean's floor but also muted outside sounds quite effectively. Certainly enough so that Hiccup was taken by surprise when the jaws were pried apart and light and air rained in on him.

In a knee-jerk reaction, Hiccup dove out of the mouth and towards un-breathed air before he bothered with his surroundings. His feet hit rocks, uneven but smoothed by the lapping water, and he slipped to his knees. Gulps into his recovery, Hiccup realized the air tasted stale, like it had never been subjected to wind or plant life.

Still, it bested anything he recently inhaled.

As the nausea faded and his eyes adjusted to the dim lighting, Hiccup took in the area.

An underground water cave was the first thing that sprang to mind.

"What is this place?" he asked. It was little more than a whisper, but the words carried and bounced and grew.

Everything around him was rock—rock floors, rock walls, a rock ceiling that looked to be five-times his height. They glittered with a faint, green glow from an unknown source of light.

The sea serpent gurgled.

Hiccup turned to see its head extended from a small pool of water. The pool didn't look nearly big
enough to fit the rest of its body, so Hiccup could only assume this was the entrance into the cave; that it led down and out into the body of water they just travelled through.

He must have been in some bizarre air pocket turned upside-down on the floor of the ocean.

"You know I can't understand you, right?" he told the beast at its babble.

The serpent stared at him. For a moment, Hiccup could have sworn he saw a filmy cover of skin close in around each eye from the side—like a sideways blink—but the moment was too fast and the lighting too dim for him to be sure.

A chime of laughter drew a gasp from his lips.

It was such a human sound—too human for the setting. The noise echoed from every direction in the tunnel of rock—much as his whisper had—but it could have only come from the darkened extension opposite the watery entrance. The cavern must continue... and he had no choice but to follow it.

Hiccup gave a short groan, and realized how odd it must be to find walking into an unknown abyss more daunting than clambering into a sea serpent's mouth.

He turned to the sea monster.

"You'll wait here for me, right?" He received an intelligent, though barely perceivable, nod in return. "Thanks."

Hiccup squared his shoulders, took a deep breath, and began to march forward, leaving his new associate behind as he moved carefully across the rugged terrain. He stepped over rock after rock, sometimes using his hands to keep his balance. It amazing him how anything so dry could exist so deep within the ocean.

As he moved forward the darkness began to recede as if he carried a lantern with him. The first true glimmer that caught Hiccup's eye turned out to be several gold coins, which then turned into a trail to an open treasure chest. From there, the valuables increased. What started out as riches sprinkled along the path became piles and piles of gold and jewels, each one mounting higher than the next. Crowns hung crookedly on garnished batons and silk scarves wrapped around remnants of artfully crafted statues.

Hiccup clamped down on the powerful urge to start stuffing his shirt with anything shiny. He didn't come here to increase his personal wealth and he didn't want to piss off whatever may guard this without meeting it first.

If it wasn't something he could kill with his dagger, then he didn't want to take the chance.

The eerie and un-sourced light brightened as his golden surroundings escalated, and white lines began to dance across the walls in bright glares, giving the once craggy stones life.

Forcing his mind away from greed, Hiccup focused on the fact that he was approaching water—had to have been with the reflection lines catching on every gold piece—and he suddenly feared that he had just gone in a circle. Or worse: that the underground cavern had an entrance and exit of water and this was the end.

Oh gods. It was the end and he hadn't even found the guardian!

Giggling erupted once more—shrill and whimsical and very, clearly feminine—and Hiccup's worries fled.
It was near... just around this next corner...everything was starting to look so bright...

The boy stumbled around a tall, Ionic column that looked to be snatched right out of an ancient Greek building. His feet stopped short, all thoughts terminated halfway from his brain to his mouth as his eyes fixed upon the wealthiest part of the stone vault.

Gems and gold still spilled from every crevice within the wall, valuables from around the world propped against the rocky walls like out-of-season furnishings.

A clear, blue-green lagoon refracted the mysterious light that moved across the walls of the odd, underwater grotto; a mystical and stunning sight few would ever see.

But what really caught his attention—the true beauty Hiccup had most favorably stumbled upon—were the three, half-nude women lounging against the rocks in the tepid looking water.

"Uh...uhm..."

The women smiled coyly at him, as though they could either detect his lack of brain activity or had been expecting him. None showed alarm that a young man had happened upon their unreachable dwelling, only elated at the new company.

Hiccup knew, right away, that these were not ordinary women. Not with their alabaster, blue-tinged skin—a blue not of hypothermia but natural and warm. Their faces were smooth and flawless, their hair wild and oddly colored. Their necks were adorned with pearls and gems.

One of the women—with dark green hair, wet and smoothed back—pulled herself from the water at his arrival and perched her shimmering bottom on a rock ledge.

Hiccup should have given some sort of reaction to actually meeting a real-life mermaid.

He should have stared at the giant-fishtail that had replaced her legs, at the hips where skin melded into scales—something only seen in pictures before now. But, for the life of him, he could not draw his eyes away from the pert, blue-shaded breasts exposed to the stagnant air.

He had only seen a handful of topless women in his nearly sixteen years, most of which were drawn (rather inaccurately) by Tuffnut or Snotlout in the dirt outside the forge. Once he had accidentally stumbled upon some of the village women bathing whilst hunting for trolls, but at seven years old simple mammary glands did not have the effect inspired now.

He thought mermaids were supposed to wear seashells over those or something...that's what all the pictures depicted. These had no seashells, these were just...there!

'The eyes, Hiccup! Look at her eyes!'

With a strength of will he hadn't known he possessed, Hiccup dragged his gaze away from the...the...yeah. He squinted at her face...her surprisingly very human face, with eyes that he could have found on any girl he'd run into on land. Though the pastel sea-green hue must have been unique to sea-dwellers. All the girls had the same eye color.

"Hello, man-child," the green-haired maid greeted. Her voice echoed amongst the walls much as her laughter had; it carried a smoothness that matched her skin and movements, all the while sounding entirely inhuman.

Hiccup blinked several times and almost swallowed too much air while trying to answer back.
"H-hi," he squeaked. He cleared his throat, cursing every God to ever grace Asgard that his voice had to crack then.

"He does not look to have swam here," a mermaid with lengthy, aquamarine hair observed. Hiccup's eyes did not linger on her front—her hair had slicked down over her chest, which he was both thankful for and shamefully disappointed about.

"How did you get here?" asked the third, a coral-haired maid.

Hiccup answered after another moment of open gaping. "Ah, I, uh, had the sea serpent bring me here. Um...in its mouth."

The girls' faces all broke out into identical grins.

"An interesting man-child!" the second mermaid stated with delight.

The first patted a flat plane of stone by her side.

"Come, sit. We wish you to speak with us."

Hiccup's legs brought him to her side in lurching movements before he even realized he had obeyed. He seated himself on the cool rock, now so close to the bare-breasted mermaid that he could touch her if he wanted to. She smelled like the ocean—not just the salt and moisture, but everything the ocean embodied—wild and free and bountiful...

What was with him and noticing girl-smells lately?

Suddenly conscious of his own smell—the smell of eel-saturated saliva—Hiccup immediately blurted, "S-sorry if I smell!"

The girls giggled again—practically as one unit—and the rosy-headed mermaid abruptly submerged herself into the pool. Neither of her friends paid any heed, seeming to only have eyes for the boy before them.

"How is it you speak Norse?" Hiccup asked after the initial shock of seeing mermaids and breasts all at once had subsided.

The aquamarine haired mermaid answered him. "We have travelled the waters of this world for many, many years, man-child. Your Norse is a language we are quite familiar with. We heard you speaking it from the sea-hole."

Well-travelled and most likely older than they appeared... Hiccup entertained the conclusion that mermaids could be closer related to dragons than humans.

"Wow. So you're...? Wow. This is...I mean. You...you're mermaids..." Hiccup's voice died into a mumble by the last word, feeling rather foolish in everything he did in front of them. "Sorry, its just, I never thought I'd meet one, let alone three..."

"I am Myrin," the green-haired ocean dweller introduced kindly. Hiccup stared at her eyes and only her eyes when she introduced herself. Not once did they stray below her neckline. Not at all.

Except for maybe a blink—but it didn't count!

"I am Magali," said the maid of cyan-colored hair as she moved fluently through the water to the edge of Hiccup's seat.
"And I am Marmara."

The coral-haired woman, Marmara, had resurfaced from the pool. She carried with her four chalices—each different in design but similar in worth—and a crystal-capped flask. There must have been an even larger horde below the cavern where humans really couldn't tread.

"Myrin, Magali, and Marmara," Hiccup repeated, trying to memorize each face to a name so he wouldn't get them confused. It would help if their names were a little more varied.

"We are sisters," Magali stated as if she could sense his thoughts.

Hiccup smiled and nodded, "I can tell. You all have the same eyes."

He didn't know if mermaids had kids in batches or one at a time, but he would believe these three could be triplets with the frequency in which they moved in sync with each other.

"I am impressed that you noticed our eyes at all," Myrin hummed, looking sly. Hiccup could have sworn she arched her back a bit when she said it. His eyes bulged slightly—though he tried to keep his reaction under control—and he steadily stared down at his lap.

He could hear the girls tittering again. As soon as they subsided he took his cue to say, "Ah, I'm Hiccup."

"An interesting name for an interesting boy," Magali purred. She reached out and ran long, rounded nails down his calf.

Hiccup shifted slightly at the touch. He didn't want to offend her by moving away.

"There have been worse," he felt he had to point out. He watched Marmara uncap the flask and pour an opaque, greenish liquid into each cup. It was a good way to distract him from the breast inches from his shoulder...as well as the hand that had yet to leave his leg.

"What brings you to our abode, Hiccup?" Myrin asked as she handed Hiccup one of the cups.

Hiccup opened his mouth, ready to answer, until the scent of the liquid hit his nose, piquant and sharp.

"Uh, what is this?"

"Gillyale."

Hiccup took a tentative sip and tried not to grimace. It wasn't a particularly bad taste, but there was something distinctly alcoholic about it, and alcohol was something he had limited experience with.
"You could say it's an acquired taste," Marmara said with a large grin, nipping lightly at hers. "One that very few human tongues will ever sample."

Beginning to feel brazen for being one of those few humans, Hiccup took a larger sip this time. It was bitter and salty, but with an earthy, almost nutty, aftertaste. He nodded, lowering the cup to his lap.

"It's not too bad." He thought on how he would breach the subject of his presence. He felt stupid trying to ask a sea serpent about the treasure, so how would he manage with these girls when everything he did in front of them felt stupid? "I...I'm here because I was sent to find a treasure..."

None of the maids appeared surprised; guarding a horde like this probably meant treasure-seekers were the only guests they got.

"What sort of treasure?" Marmara prompted.

Myrin treaded her fingers through a mound of gold coins by her scaled hips. "Riches?"

Magali trailed her finger up to his knee. "Arts?"

"Exotic beauties?" Marmara pulled herself forward from the pool so that she could rest her stomach on the rocks. Her breasts, notably larger than her sisters', hung over the ground so her nipples just brushed the rocks as she put her weight on her elbows.

Hiccup took another long swill from the cup.

The girls began laughing, like one would at a private joke. Hiccup gave shaky grin and griped his cup tighter. He didn't know if they were making fun of him or not, he didn't know if they received more humans than he was led to believe and were used to messing with their heads before sending them off empty-handed. The sea serpent implied that they were the ones who stole the treasure from the pirate. For all he knew, these were beautiful, cold-blooded killers who collected anything off their murder victims.
"I'm not sure, exactly," he answered honestly. Honesty had gotten his ass kicked many times in the past, but, ironically enough, it had also kept him alive.

Laughter drawing to a close, the girls regarded him with curiosity—more doubt than the pleased interest they showered him in before—and he was quick to continue. "I was only given, uh, guidelines. This is something that was taken from a pirate, I guess by you guys—er, girls. I don't know which pirate and I don't know when and I don't know where the pirate got it from...I really have nothing to go on except that some Frenchman named Arnulf really, really wants it."

Oh man, he just sounded so lame.

"He sort of blackmailed me into this. And, um, took my stuff..."

And now he sounded like a lame pushover.

The mermaids exchanged looks unreadable to Hiccup. The sort of look only siblings could pass between one another.

"We know which treasure you're speaking of," Magali said slowly. Hiccup could feel his jaw slacken; he had not expected to get any recollection of the treasure. Not with his description.

"Do you still have it?" he asked eagerly.

The mermaids nodded with Myrin remarking, "We do...however, we cannot simply give you something for free. First, you must do something for us."

He shouldn't have been surprised—this was how the world worked, both above and below the ocean. Hiccup gave her a strong nod, inhaling deeply through his nose (perhaps puffing his chest out a bit) and steeling himself for an impossible task.

"You must..." Myrin paused dramatically, "...tell us a story."

The air expelled from his lungs in confusion. "What?"

More giggling ensued. Hiccup thought it was good that they were so lovely and mysterious or he might have held less tolerance for the noise.

"Uh...what kind of story?" They had to give him something more than that. Unless this vagueness served as revenge for not being able to identify the treasure he sought.

"A true one," Marmara insisted as Magali demanded with, "A fun one!"

"Something daring!"

"Something with love!"

"If not love then hope, at least!"

"It must have intrigue!"

"And heartbreak!"

"It must be true," Marmara stated again.

Hiccup sat there, blinking, as the three mermaids threw in their conditions, the cup slack in his hand.
The only true story he knew was his own.

"Okay..." he said, drawing a breath. "Okay... This story begins on an island called Berk. It's twelve days north of hopeless and a few degrees south of freezing to death. It's located solidly on the meridian of misery..."

So Hiccup regaled them the tale of a misfit boy who couldn't find belonging with his own People, despite his every effort. Though thought to be cursed by the gods with an inability to conform, this misfit refused to accept such the reputation, and continued to try and gain favor in the only way he knew how. Each attempt turned more disastrous than the next, earning him greater and great scorn... with the exception of one endeavor, one moment of weakness and strength where his heart became stronger than his desire. One moment that transformed the misfit's life.

Hiccup spoke of a growing friendship and a time of healing. He spoke of an infatuation with a talented Viking that was crushed with a multifaceted rejection. He spoke of abandoning one life and embracing another. He spoke of a dragon's culture, a demon's tyranny, and a human's war.

The mermaids listened in rapt attention. They gasped at the misfit's jump from a pirate ship and laughed at his escape from the Saxons. They simpered at the vördr's kiss, cooed at Hiccup's English dialogue, and cheered at the misfit's decision to stop the war one day.

Throughout his anecdote Hiccup's unease around the mermaids ebbed and his hand steadily fed himself more gillyale. His tongue adapted to the taste, as Marmara said it would.

He felt good to be speaking of his adventures in such an objective manner, like he could share his decisions as he narrated his tale to an audience and get a second opinion—even if only by reaction. He didn't put himself in a favorable light when possible; he admitted to every mistake and embellished on moments of negative thinking. This wasn't a story for Hiccup. This was a confession.

"...and so he climbed into the sea serpent's mouth, prepared to face the fearsome guardians of the much coveted treasure, and watched his friend disappear from view as the serpent closed its jaws over him," Hiccup finished in a rather dramatic hush. Somewhere around the pirate situation he had really fallen into the adjectives.

He didn't know how long he had been there, but his butt was starting to fall asleep. He shifted slightly and took another mouthful of the gillyale. The cup had somehow refilled itself.

"Is that it?" Magali asked, sounding disappointed. She had taken her hand off his leg sometime during the story.

Hiccup nodded. "For now."

Myrin frowned, splashing her tailfin against the top of the pool's water. "But how does the story end?"

"I don't know yet," Hiccup said truthfully with a shrug.

"Such a shame," Magali sighed, resting her chin on crossed arms, and Hiccup couldn't believe how genuinely forlorn she looked. Her sisters had similar expressions. He recalled their enrapture; how they reacted to everything he said as though they were small children and he were reciting an epic legend before bedtime.

The words bubbled up from someplace inside him that he had no control over: "I'll come back here someday and let you know the rest."
He didn't know why he said it—perhaps only to keep the sad looks from their faces—but it was out there, and three pairs of lips no longer puckered downwards.

"Do you promise?" Marmara asked, and her voice had lowered, coarsened. No longer was there a giggling, ditzy girl draped across the rocks. Her sea-green eyes lost all signs of flirtation and the blue hue of her skin stood out more starkly, reminding Hiccup that these were not just silly, whimsical mermaids. These were creatures of the sea that probably had powers unknown to him.

"I promise," he said resolutely and he found he meant it. He would honestly try to come back here some day to finish the story.

Marmara smiled at his words, once again kittenish, and pushed herself up so that she sat on his other side from Myrin. Her breasts were not as tight to her body as Myrin's, being heavier and of a softer build, but their full, rounded bottoms made him feel like he had to sit on his hands to keep from—

He'd return only to finish the story.

He had yet to see Magali—

Story only!

A weight fell on his lap. Hiccup looked down to find a pair of ratty, old boots Myrin had kindly deposited onto his person.

"Your treasure," Myrin presented with a flourish of her hand.

Hiccup stared, bemused.

"Is... that it?" he asked, unintentionally echoing Magali's earlier exclamation.

"Is it not what you expected?" Magali asked, batting her lashes.

Hiccup picked at the leather rim of one, worn from age and overuse. "Uh, well, I guess I didn't have any expectations...I just hope Arnulf gives me my stuff back."

"Trust us. He will not be displeased," Marmara assured him.

"I trust you," Hiccup said with a warm grin generated by a warming drink. He placed the chalice on the ground and made to stand. Magali gripped his ankle.

"Wait," she commanded. She looked to Myrin, who held something else out to Hiccup.

"This is for you," the mermaid said as she handed him a hollowed out ivory tusk. A horn. Two strips of braided leather encircled both ends, attaching the horn to a flat shoulder strap of the same material.

"For me?" Hiccup wondered, gently accepting the gift. The ivory was cool and smooth in his hands, but rutted with beautifully embossed designs. Upon closer inspection Hiccup could make out the figures of an eagle, a rooster, and a lion.
"A gift for your company," Marmara explained. She sounded delighted at his obvious fascination with the offering.

"Thank you," he returned graciously, finally standing. He adorned the shoulder strap diagonally across his chest so that the horn rested above his right hip.

His legs relished in the new blood flow, tingling in response to the awaited movement. His head reacted as well, feeling warm and fuzzy as a slight bout of buzzed dizziness overtook him.

Boots tucked under one arm, Hiccup looked down at the trio of beautiful mermaids who served to intimidate and entrance him. Perhaps it was the gillyale that had him taking in a blatant eyeful of their bodies and committing it to memory. The mermaids didn't seem to mind; the looked up at him with only fondness.

"I'll come back," he promised the three sisters. And he meant it.

The ride back had only been slightly more tolerable, and Hiccup could only attested this to the strange, alcoholic drink. This time, the journey's end greeted him with moving, fresh, sea-breezed air and one, over-anxious Night Fury.

::Hiccup!::

Toothless rushed forward, looking ready to tackle Hiccup to the ground as the boy gracelessly dropped out of the grisly mouth. The dragon skidded to a stop, upending sand and pebbles, still keeping a substantial distance from the sea serpent and Hiccup.

"I'm fine," Hiccup assured him once he replenished the good air in his lungs. He had his "treasure", he had his horn, and he had his life. Mission accomplished.

::No you're not!:: Toothless hissed, stamping his feet in agitation. ::Bathe! Bathe immediately!::

Hiccup couldn't argue against his friend's less than cordial welcome because he desperately wanted a bath.

"We have to find a lake first!" He was not going to bathe in the ocean. That would leave him feeling crusty. "Calm down!"

::You are NOT getting on me smelling like that:: Toothless continued to rant ::I don't care if we are suddenly attacked by all the Frenchmen in the land—it is not happening!::
Hiccup rolled his eyes and turned to the sea serpent, who regarded the Night Fury with haughty amusement. He patted its slippery skin, drawing the great eye to him and, making sure Toothless couldn't see his face, gave the creature a warm smile.

"Thank you," he whispered. The sea serpent gave him the slightest of nods.

::Yes, yes, he accepts your thanks. You are done with each other. Now, get over here!:· Toothless demanded impatiently. Then added, ::But not too close to me::

Hiccup drew away from the serpent, feeling almost reluctant at leaving the enigmatic beast without ever really getting to understand it. Its motives for helping him—for not eating him, really—were still unclear.

"Goodbye," he bid and he began his return to Toothless' side.

Toothless waggled his tail in agitation, keeping one eye on the retreating sea serpent and the other on the boy who was not moving fast enough for his liking.

"Okay, let's go find a lake," Hiccup sighed to the dragon. His feet almost stopped as a thought struck him. "Oh crap, they took all my other clothes!"

Toothless gave the stinking human a wide berth as he passed, curling his lip.

::Then you will be unclothed for a while because those are getting burned::

"You're being unreasonable." He just got this shirt!

::I will do the deed myself:: Toothless promised. Hiccup did not like how serious the dragon sounded.

"I'll hug you," Hiccup threatened. "Right now."

Remarkable...

::You won't—::

Hiccup slowed to a stop, just steps before reaching the cover of the trees. The rest of Toothless' threat faded into the background.

...Simply remarkable...

He turned just in time to see the tips of pale horns disappear into the deep blue. He squinted at the space once occupied by the sea serpent. The sea was calm once more.

He shook his head, holding it as the dizziness returned. It could have been the alcohol but...

"Did...did he just—"

::No, now move!:: Toothless growled, chomping his teeth at him. He couldn't get close enough to head butt the stubborn human, so terrorization would have to be the motivating factor.

Hiccup reluctantly turned away from the sea and stumbled forward...into a tree branch. Swearing, Hiccup grabbed his face with one hand and reached out to steady himself against a trunk—

—only to miscalculate and topple over onto the ground. Through another round of profanities Hiccup began to laugh at himself, still rubbing his smarting face.
Toothless sat back on his haunches, regarding the cursing human with narrow eyes.

::Are you inebriated?:: he asked seriously. He had seen this behavior many times before in humans.

Hiccup laughed harder at Toothless' face, somehow managing to awkwardly find his footing once more while collecting the fallen treasure.

"Yes," he confirmed with a last, hearty chuckle. "On everything."

On gillyale, on hormones, on hallucinations, on life...everything.

Chapter End Notes

*Art by Bloodmoon14
**Gillyale is actually a play on Harry Potter's gillywater. I can only take partial credit for that.
Bluffed

Chapter Summary

Hiccup's second encounter with Arnulf goes much differently.

Hardship has Astrid opening up to an old friend.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bluffed

::Wait...that is it?: Toothless exclaimed, knocking one of the boots over with his nose. ::That is what you nearly killed me for?:

Hiccup reached over and snatched the shoe from the shore of the lake where they set camp, shooting Toothless a dark look. Yesterday's high had been brought down significantly by the everlasting and freezing bath he had been subjected to. He literally had to talk the dragon through finding some conkers and mashing them up for a bootleg version of soap, all while sitting naked in a French lake. No faster way to sober up.

Even after he gained Toothless' approval for his personal hygiene, he still had to wait until his only pair of clothes dried from a vicious scrub down. His lack of effects became quite apparent when he realized he had no change of clothes or comb, and he was left to fall into a chilled, fitful sleep, unaided by extra clothing or blankets and aggravated by wet hair.

Now he was stuck with a rat nest bundled around his head and only his fingers to brush it out.

"In what way did you nearly die? Look at who you're talking to! What did you do that was remotely life-threatening?"

Hearing Toothless complain from the get-go that morning had done nothing to help Hiccup's mood. Apparently, the dragon had been under the impression that the pretty horn had been the treasure, and the boots were just an impulse grab. He insisted that Hiccup did weird things like that all the time and he'd have believed it.

Toothless sniffed. ::Watching you do exceedingly stupid things is harmful for my health. You are going to turn my scales grey prematurely!::

"Good. We can die at the same time," Hiccup grunted, tugging through a hard snarl.

The dragon's jaw-fins fell back in perturbation. ::Do not joke about that!::

Hiccup bit his lip, realizing that he unthinkingly treading on a subject still sensitive for both of them.
"Sorry..."

Toothless harrumphed.

::Too right you are::
His human companion continued to try and manage the silly hair while looking properly cowed, and Toothless felt a twinge of sympathy for the boy. It must be awful to have such a limited time in this world. It was no wonder humans rotated through times of war and peace more often than a snake could shed its skin. They lived on hyper-speed.

He could understand the human's discomfort with his situation since last night; Toothless had done his best to keep the boy warm but apparently prolong exposure to moisture in cold temperatures made it nearly impossible for Hiccup to fully dry.

Toothless tried to think of something reassuring to say to Hiccup—anything that would lift his spirits—but his attention was jerked in another direction. His nose twitched first, lifting to the air, and he gave several heavy sniffs in succession.

Ah, the scent of perpetual disgruntlement.

::They're coming:: he warned aloud.

Hiccup leapt to his feet in an instant, hair forgotten. He didn't need to wonder who 'they' were.

"Hide!" he hissed, pushing at Toothless' flank to get the dragon moving.

The Night Fury immediately began to protest, ::But I want to:::

"No! Not yet!" Hiccup knew exactly what Toothless wanted to do. "I need my stuff first!"

::Fine, fine:: Toothless made to turn when Hiccup stopped him.

"Wait! Saddle on!" Hiccup said in a loud, rushed whisper. He had no idea how close or far the Frenchmen were, but this was a necessity he felt he had to risk. He threw the leather over Toothless' back and the dragon waited impatiently for Hiccup to assemble the straps.

::They're almost h:::

"Take this!" Hiccup next shoved the horn at him. "I don't want them to think it's the treasure."

::It probably is:: Toothless retorted as he grabbed the leather strap with his mouth.

"No! It's mine!" Hiccup insisted at the Night Fury, who practically melted into the shadows. He didn't care how childish that came out; he wasn't giving it up. Especially when beautiful mermaid sisters gave it to him.

"You argre facing dze wrong dee-rehc-tion you fooleesh boy," an irritable voice sounded behind him. Like a curse reacting to a trigger, Hiccup's cheek throbbed where the man struck him yesterday. "Euh! I dzought you Norgrsemehn wergre supposed to be good at dee-rehc-tion. Or wergre you actually trgrying to ehscape frgrom us? Dzis ees not whergre we agrgreed to meet!"

Hiccup turned to find Arnulf with a smaller group of lackeys assembled behind him. One of the underlings had Hiccup's belongings, the pack hanging carelessly from a gloved fist, and Hiccup was suddenly struck by such a forceful sense of injustice that self-assurance bloomed within him. He really hated being bullied.

"I figured you were competent enough to find me." Hiccup retorted. Now that he had leverage over them in the form of the treasure, and the comfort of knowing Toothless proximity, he felt much less inclined to put up with tripe on Arnulf's behalf.
The Frenchmen must have sensed Hiccup's increased mettle compared to their last encounter, because his scowl managed to turn sour.

"Do you 'ave my trgrehsure?" he asked.

Hiccup didn't favor him with a verbal response, only a cold look and a stiff reach for the boots—still worn and moth-eaten and looking anything but treasure-like. He picked them up by the ankle cuffs and held them out.

"Is this what you wanted?"

*Please let it be what you wanted.*

Deep-seated nervousness chipped away at his bravado—a very logical fear that he *didn't* actually have the treasure and was, in fact, down a bargaining chip. The looks exchanged by the men were not promising; many regarded the shoes with arched eyebrows and grimaces.

And then, looking like a dragon amongst a flock of sheep, Arnulf's face broke into a... a pleased sneer, if there could ever be such a thing.

"Wehll eet seems you 'ave a purgpose on dzis eharth after all, leettle boy!" Arnulf remarked. He gazed at the boots with such predatory intensity that Hiccup felt passing fear for his hand.

"Really?" Hiccup asked tonelessly. His tense uncertainty dipped into incredulous doubt. "$This is what you wanted?"

The aristocratic face was brought under strict control once more.

"I do not need to exxplain mysehlf to dze likes of you," Arnulf jeered. "$Now, geeve eet hergre."

"My stuff first," Hiccup demanded. He gave the man holding his bag a pointed look so the message would be clear in more than just Norse.

The man looked at Arnulf who barked, "$Rendez-le-lui!"

The Count clearly had nothing to lose in giving Hiccup his stuff; a single boy stood no chance at trying to cheat he and his men.

The nameless Frenchman threw the wicker bag and it landed in the dirt feet from Hiccup's own, bouncing slightly. He could hear the clang of Astrid's axe against sacks of coins as it jostled.

Hiccup slowly lowered himself enough to grab it, keeping his eyes on the gathering of irritated humans. His gaze never left them, even as he fumbled with the clasp and dug his hand into the bag. Only once or twice did his eyes flicker downwards to confirm what he felt as he took inventory.

Arnulf watched Hiccup with the same patience one would have for a child insisting on counting every step to the Mead Hall.

Hiccup sighed, hoping he mimicked the Frenchman enough to convey his annoyance, and dropped the sack to the ground.

"You still haven't given me everything," Hiccup stated flatly. Not the most important thing, but certainly not something he was willing to give up.

A cruel smile smoothed its way beneath a thin, carefully groomed mustache and Arnulf took a casual
step forward. He patted a bulge under his belt.

"Eef you argre rgreh-fergr-ing to dze rgrubies... I took dze leebhrgrty of putting dzem undehr dze cargre of someone much morgre app-rgro-prgri-ate. I am afrgraid dze value of such gehms ees wastehd on dze likes of you."

The words barbed him, as well as the oily manner in which they were delivered, but Hiccup couldn't even muster the expression of surprise. He should have foreseen this the moment his bag had left his possession.

"Well you're not getting these," Hiccup said, taking a step backwards towards the lake with the boots gripped securely in his hand. It was time to see how well he could bluff.

Arnulf gave a short, false laugh. "I don't dzeenk you undehrgrstanding dze seetuation, inggrate—"

"No, I don't think you understand," Hiccup interrupted, his voice strong. He lifted the boots. "Do you even realize what me having these means?"

Arnulf's face and actions showed badly concealed hesitation, like he had several sudden ideas but was unsure of which one Hiccup referred to. His uncertainty gave Hiccup another boost in confidence.

"You were right," Hiccup began slowly, "I do have powers...and you forced me to use them. So as you can see," heiggled the boots, "this means I did get the sea serpent to retrieve these for me. In fact, I can get it to do all sorts of things..." A dreadful comprehension dawned on Arnulf, and the Count then realized Hiccup was not going to be a cooperative as he initially expected.

Hiccup took another step forward. "So if you don't want your trade routes to be demolished, if you don't want me to make it impossible for you to ever travel North, you will give me the rest of my belongings right now."

For a single moment, Arnulf looked like he might actually consider taking the chance—not to keep the rubies out of greed but to spite Hiccup for having the audacity to threaten him.

Even as Arnulf made no move to relinquish the stones, Hiccup could see his words had set the man off balance. Now he just needed to keep pushing—not too hard, he didn't want Arnulf piecing half-truths together and calling his bluff. Just hard enough to make the threat look plausible.

"Look," Hiccup sighed, aiming for an image of control and security, "I'm a pretty nice guy," Truth. "I would have rather avoided all this." Former truth. "But, if it comes down to it—if you continue to push me—then you will have to take responsibility for the misfortunes that will ruin your life. I will destroy your economy, your village, and everything else that makes you powerful." False. "Because I can."

Truth.

Arnulf looked torn, conflicted in believing Hiccup, in challenging his overt threat, and in saving face in front of his men. His army could not understand Norse, but they would surely know something was up if he handed more payment over for nothing in return.

Hiccup, meanwhile, relished in the power he felt at besting someone with words. It was hard to do on Berk, where even if he insulted someone forwards and backwards it was either lost on them or ended with a punch to the head. But against someone like Arnulf, someone who understood the power of blackmail and persuasion and subterfuge, he could see results. Hiccup watched the man's face morph between reactions, gradually falling as Hiccup delivered his terms.
Even Hiccup’s poise made all the difference: from casual annoyance for having to deal with the situation at all to the cold resolution of his threat. He destroyed this man’s game, his confidence; he reset the board in his favor.

"Eef I give you dze rubies, weell you give me dze boots?" Arnulf asked, his voice low, almost pleading if it were possible.

"I might as well," Hiccup shrugged, trying to remain nonchalant, wanting to keep his inner rush at the turn of this meeting under wraps. "I have no use for these."

Arnulf huffed and with reluctant fingers retrieved the sack from his belt. It didn't look any thinner to Hiccup, though he'd still have to check it to be sure.

Hiccup held out his hand. "Toss them."

"I alrgr already gave you dze bag," Arnulf argued. "Eet ees zu trur to geeve me somedzing."

Hiccup's head was shaking before the man finished talking. He wasn't relinquishing this new power. Not now.

"The deal was my stuff for the "treasure"—you never finished giving me my stuff," Hiccup pointed out. He motioned with his fingers for Arnulf to comply, keeping his palm facing up.

Many of the of the had Frenchmen lost their stiff posture by now, shifting to get a better look at what their leader held in the little bag. Apparently Arnulf hadn't let on to the others that there was anything of value in Hiccup's belongings.

"How badly do you want these?" Hiccup prodded, giving the boots a good shake. "Because I have half a mind to throw them back to the ocean for even trying to steal from me. Then you can wait around for the next giant snake charmer to come around. It might take a while..."

"Non! No," Arnulf quickly composed himself. "Dzat won't be nehcessary."

"Are you sure? Arnulf the Patient has a nice ring to it, don't you think?"

The man's eyes flashed and his chest swelled with a harsh inhalation through flared nostrils. Hiccup figured he hit a sore point by going after Arnulf's reputation.

"I weell make heestorgry," Arnulf growled. "I weell ehxpand my land all dze way to dze Océan Atlantique, and eet weell not be widz such a name. Hergre!"

He tossed the bag to Hiccup with just the right about of force to bring it within reaching distance. Hiccup snatched it from the air, rubbing the cloth between his fingers and counting four lumps.

"Cheers," he said in English. He tucked it away under his belt with a bright smile. The men behind Arnulf shared surreptitious glances.

Arnulf cleared his throat, frowning deeply. Hiccup made a show of knocking the heel of his palm against his forehead.

"Oh right, the boots! Sure. So, I'm going to give them to you, and then I'm going to leave—right—away." Hiccup emphasized the last part loudly towards the tree, earning some odd looks. "Just going to hand it over and leave immediately. It will happen so fast you'll forget I ever existed."

Not likely.
Arnulf was not in the mood for stalling. "Fine, fine! Just geeve me dze damn boots, fool!"

Hiccup held both boots in his right hand and tried to look as calm as possible as he approached the Frenchmen with even-paced steps. Arnulf's face suggested he would very much like to hit Hiccup, even if it risked trouble from the serpent.

To be safe, Hiccup made an offhanded comment. "The sea serpent's expecting me for a rundown—he wants to make sure you get these alright. I told him to wreak havoc if I didn't show up on time. Just for insurance, you know?"

Arnulf's nose twitched. Probably trying to fight down another sneer.

Hiccup calculated where his feet were to stop—not within Arnulf’s immediate striking distance but close enough to hand over the boots with an outstretched arm. He calculated the direct angle to approach, predicting the arm Arnulf would use in grabbing the boots and the turn of his body. He calculated the strength of his own stance against the split vulnerability of Arnulf's.

Leaning forward, turned just slightly to collect his prize, Arnulf's fingers touched the deer-skin leather of the Seven League Boots. The man could see his future in that moment—his power, his connections, his slow, premeditated, and thorough takeover of Europe. With those boots he would capture the loyalty of his enemy's allies; from Castile to Saxony, no distance would be too great for floundered and twisted communications; he wouldn't have to rely on the dubious trust of messengers or carrier pigeons. It would be his own slick tongue that swayed and forged his connections, his own two feet that brought him—

And then a sharp blow to the face shattered the express reverie. The boots, only in his grasp for a heartbeat, fell to the ground as Arnulf was knocked backwards.

As soon as Hiccup's (more than justified) punch landed the boy turned and ran, stooping only to get the bag as he sprinted towards the forest. If this wasn't a testament to his utter lack of Viking conduct then he didn't know what was.

Arnulf was only just recovering from the blow, a hand held over his face more in disbelief than pain, as though he weren't quite sure it had actually happened.

Several indignant and swearing men pursued the escaping Norseman.

"He hehd it coming!" Hiccup hollered jauntily over his shoulder as he moved into thicker foliage. He was confident in his speed, as always, and swerved between a handful trees before he saw Toothless, crouched and ready to fly.

"Let's go!" he yipped, pouncing onto the saddle.

::I wanted to have a go at him:: Toothless whined, but he complied nonetheless.

Hiccup laughed. "You'll get your chance the next time we pass through. Promise."

Their ascent possessed its usual bump-and-jerk, with Toothless pumping his powerful wings to get them airborne. Hiccup moved his body in time with Toothless', experience teaching him the most aerodynamic methods of fast rising. Before he knew it, they were already in the clear, and Arnulf’s men were left in the forest.

Now they only needed to worry about being seen in broad daylight; they were moving inland and would have less opportunity to escape oversea.
"The next time you must follow with another strike," Toothless advised, though Hiccup could hear a note of pride in his voice. "He hit first, unprovoked, so by right you get two."

"I don't think the French agree with that," Hiccup returned. He discreetly rubbed his knuckles; thankful he at least missed the chainmail head covering Arnulf wore. He would take physical fighting one step at a time.

Toothless snorted, envisioning his future return to France. "I don't think I agree with the French."

"I agree with you."

Hiccup was back in the air—the both of them were—and he couldn't help but compare it to his underwater ride. This was where he belonged. This was what he left the comfort of a stable home and birthright for. The more he flew, the less he had to regret.

Though his submarine journey hadn't been without its perks.

"So," he said conversationally, as if he hadn't just nailed a Frenchman in the face and then run off like some mad deviant, "Tell me everything you know about mermaids..."
A series of harsh, raspy coughs burst from the bed by the roaring fire. Astrid jerked at the noise, and then sent the shifting bulge in the blankets a doleful glance. She knew from experience that her mother wasn't awake; Glüm often fell into fits during her nearly coma-long sleeps.

The winter had been a brutal one—both in temperature and in raids. The Hofferson house had been damaged one too many times. There weren't enough resources to go around for quick repairs, and, inevitably, the austere conditions had taken its toll on her family. Her mother had gotten sick. It started slow—a little too much exposure, skipping on a meal or two so that those who fought hardest could have their energy. Then it snowballed into dizzy spells and high temperatures and day-long naps.

Now Glüm hardly left the bed, too weak to do anything but endure the pain wracking her aged body. She could barely keep down food, could barely lift her head to drink broth. The combined heat of the fire and piles of blankets could not keep the shivers under-control. No cool cloth could abate the burning of her head.

She no longer had the speech to continue apologizing to her daughter for having to take care of her. A part of Astrid was thankful for this, for she could hardly stand the guilt of her sick mother trying to take responsibility for this grave misfortune. When Astrid had declared that she'd rather "die than get married" so many weeks ago, she hadn't meant trading any death for her independence. No marriage arrangements loomed on the horizon now—not without any parent available for bartering—but this was not a price Astrid was willing to pay.

This felt more like a punishment for rebuffing the Viking way of life.

Berk was well into Gói now—in the throes of the harshest weather—and spring was too far away for her to bother with hope. The only thing that drove Astrid through her monotonous routine each day was obligation. Every now and then she would make tiny promises to herself and the Gods, trying to spring some good into her life again. Most of her vows promised her ready agreement to any marriage as long as her mother survived. She'd do anything for her mother to survive. She didn't want to be alone anymore.

A light, quick knock sounded at the door. Astrid frowned and set aside her work. Very few Vikings would produce such a knock.

Casting the bed a fleeting look, she rose from her seat and swung open the heavy wooden barrier. "Oh," Astrid greeted blandly to the caller.

"Hey," Ruffnut said in her throaty voice, made more so by the ruthless elements that assaulted anyone who stepped outside. The taller girl strode into the threshold without an invite, but Astrid wouldn't have expected anything less from the generally rude twin. "My mom wanted you to have this."

Ruffnut held out a basket that smelled of fresh bread and lamb under the blanketed top.

"Thanks," Astrid said emotionlessly, taking the offered food. Every now and then, when people could take a break from their own winter trials, they would remember those who were unable to care for themselves. She had been given mostly food in the time her mother had been sick, as people knew she had little knowledge on cooking; they recognized her as only a fighter and rightly so.

As Astrid moved to place the gift on the table Ruffnut took a moment to take in the room. She
immediately noticed the occupied bed, highlighted by moving flames above the hearth. The activity of the fire made the bed look so inanimate, so still, it gave the disheartening impression that death had already taken Glüm Hofferson.

The entire home reeked of depression, for that matter. Frigid and still and quiet. It was suffocating.

The braided girl looked at Astrid, who appeared thinner and wan. She probably had no time to train or take care of herself these days; she certainly hadn't been seen at náttmál for a couple weeks.

Astrid had been in a weird place for a long time now. The girls once shared a feminine camaraderie; they learned to rely on each other as the boys became boys and the differences in their genders became more apparent. Astrid was still too focused on becoming the best and Ruffnut too much of a mischief-maker for them to ever become good friends, but they still had an understanding. They still could exchange exasperated looks and wily, knowing smiles that only women would understand. It annoyed her brother to no end.

And then everything changed. Ruffnut couldn't remember if it was before or after Hiccup left—things got kind of hazy thinking that far back—but Astrid had let an anger take over her heart and mind that left her more isolated than before. The girl had gone and tried to turn herself into an icon; her dedication to the Viking code became exemplary, like she was the epitome of a Viking warrior, and people both feared and exulted her for it. Ruffnut would have believed Astrid aimed to become an undead einherjar or something equally as preposterous.

Ruffnut had her own theories, and all of them hinged on that one moment where Astrid stood amidst the Vikings of Berk and they denied her. At the time she had laughed along with them... she even took some malicious pleasure in Astrid's fallen face. Maybe Hiccup being driven out of the clan hadn't been enough for Astrid? Maybe Astrid felt so insulted that such a traitor to their creed tried to best her that she wanted to drive home to the village who they were and what they stood for?

Whatever the reason was, it not only pushed Ruffnut away, but anyone who once felt comfortable enough to call Astrid their friend. Maybe she never forgave them for being a part of that crowd. Or maybe an icon had no need for friends.

But then, an icon wasn't supposed to be human.

Astrid had lost much of her steam as of late—ever since her mother had fallen too ill to leave her bed and the girl had been forced to spend more and more time maintaining the house. The drive to impress and better herself had abandoned Astrid, and with it the shield that had kept her from realizing how remote she had become. Her father wouldn't be back until spring, perhaps summer, if at all, and she had nothing but the occasional gift from well-wishers to connect her to the village.

Perhaps, in the beginning, Astrid could endure the isolation, but it had been too long, and despair had finally taken a hold of the young woman.

Ruffnut wasn't the sentimental kind, but she had trouble stomaching the sight of someone as vivacious as Astrid looking so defeated.

"You know...my mom wouldn't mind watching over yours for a little while," she suggested. "You could come down to the Mead Hall one night for some drinks with the guys. They miss you."

This was a bit of a white lie; the guys were intimidated enough by Astrid at this point not to do much more than admire her from afar. Even Snotlout had backed off from his sycophantic praise.

The 'proud' Astrid would have flat out refused without so much as a twitch in her face. But Ruffnut,
miraculously, witnessed a sadness—almost longing—in Astrid's eyes before the girl replied:

"I have too much to do."

Astrid gestured to the unfinished clothing.

Ruffnut looked at the mess of half-finished fabrics—unable to tell if they were meant to be headscarves or blankets or hot mitts. Then she looked around the home that had become a prison—a depressing, guilt-adding prison. She inwardly sighed at the ridiculous and unwanted wave of compassion that overwhelmed her, but it couldn't be helped.

"I'll help you," Ruffnut stated with finality. She moved with purpose towards one of the chairs at the table and picked up a needle.

Astrid usually would have objected; she never accepted assistance in anything because she didn't want to look incompetent and she never wanted to owe anyone for favors. She was averse to giving anyone any sort of power over her. But there was something about Ruffnut's nonchalance in everything she did and Astrid found herself grateful for. If the girl lit your favorite doll on fire or decided to help you finish chores, it was always with the same attitude—clearly un-wanting of thanks.

And gratitude was something she still hadn't quite mastered in delivering. She sat in the chair across from Ruffnut and resumed her practice.

"How is she doing?" Ruffnut asked after a moment of silence.

Astrid shrugged one shoulder, feeling weird enough that she had someone in the house with her, seated like a guest. She felt like she had forgotten how to even hold a conversation.

"Think she'll make the winter?"

Had anyone else asked her that Astrid would have knocked their head against the wall. But Ruffnut had spent the last decade conditioning people to expect insensitive questions from her. It was rather clever on her part.

And the bluntness of the question spurred the other blonde into a truthful reply. She focused on her needle as she spoke, so she wouldn't have to look at anything else—not at her mother and not at Ruffnut.

"It's hard to say right now. At first I thought she could—I mean, she's my mother—it's not like I could have been born from...from a wimp or..." Something was happening within her; something she didn't like. A pressure that collected into a heavy mass over the weeks, sitting on her heart, now rose to her throat, clogging and hurting. She focused on keeping the pain at bay, wanting to uphold her resolute in the face of the first person she'd talked to in days, but her distraction with her countenance caused words to spill from her mouth, unchecked. "It's just so out of control. Every time she looks better she gets worse the next day and it's happening too fast. We don't have the medicine to help her and... sometimes I think she doesn't have the will to live any more. How can someone face death and just...just lay there? It makes me so mad and I hate it because I know this isn't her fault and I have no business being so angry with her..."

"It is frustrating," Ruffnut agreed, nodding. She kept her face neutral and her words few. Though she would never be comfortable being someone's living diary, she knew Astrid needed some sort of outlet... more than anyone she knew. Astrid needed someone to just listen.

Astrid didn't know when she set down her craft, but she found herself rubbing her throat, trying to
ease the mysterious pressure, and leaning forward on her elbows so that her bangs could partially hide her face. It could have been Ruffnut's presence or maybe she had finally reached her limit, but she was losing control—over everything.

"It's more than frustrating...this should have never happened. If it hadn't been for these damn dragons she wouldn't have gotten this sick," Astrid growled, knocking the headscarf she had been working on to the ground. "I should have been paying attention during the raid; I should have seen them coming. It could have spared our house, spared her the cold." She had been distracted at the time, the first damaging blow their home took, when yelling at her mother. "But now it's too late. I can't... I can't..."

Fight this. She couldn't fight this, she didn't know how. And it was killing her.

Astrid had been trained from birth to be a fighter—to protect and hunt and survive. She was only as powerful as she made herself to be, and she did everything in her power to make herself the best. She wanted to be the best hunter, the best protector and the best survivor.

But how could she fight something she had no control over? This was a battle decided by her mother and the gods; she wasn't even a participant, just a spectator on the sidelines who had to live with the end result. And right now nothing seemed to be fighting in their favor. It killed her inside, to have to witness such an idle death; slow and action-less and very clearly destined for Hel.

A different, but entirely related, strain began to push from behind her skull, concentrating around her eyes. She tried—oh how she tried—to keep the tears down. She could feel the temperature emanating from her eyes swiftly increase as her vision began to swim.

"I hate this," she whispered out loud. The words burned in her throat. "I hate this."

A shadow fell over her, and Ruffnut bent at her feet to pick up the unfinished hem.

"Whether she makes it or not, you're going to have to learn how to do a proper running stitch," Ruffnut said, gesturing to the slightly uneven pattern—the one Astrid thought she had gotten pretty good with, but almost certainly paled in comparison to Ruffnut's. Sewing was probably the one thing Ruffnut had over Astrid—

And then realization struck the tearful girl like a chilling slap: Ruffnut knew exactly what she was going through. Ruffnut had already felt the anxiety of the wait, the helplessness, the anger and the despair...because Ruffnut had a little sister, Hangnail, who died to winter illness three years ago. Hangnail had only been nine.

That's how Ruffnut became so good at sewing; she used to practice making outfits for her little sister. And for a while continued to do so, leaving them in a pasture of Cranesbills on the east side of the island as a tribute to the deceased little girl. Not even Tuffnut knew this. It was something only Astrid knew on the privilege of being her only girlfriend.

Something she let fall apart.

Sniffing—and trying to make it discreet—Astrid accepted the cloth back with a nod and a harsh swallow she couldn't hide well enough.

If Ruffnut could sit before her, comforting her in her own crude way, then Astrid could get through this as well. There would be a normalcy beyond this nightmare, she just had to persevere. She was a Viking, and not just any Viking—she was a Viking of Berk. She would fight dragons and accept the deaths caused by them—whether direct or indirect—with grace. She wasn't the first to lose a loved
one to illness and she wouldn't be the last. It was an occupational hazard. It was their way of life.

Ruffnut sat back in her seat and resumed her own pattern. The girls continued their pastime in a muted atmosphere, but this time the silence wasn't stony or awkward. This time the heat from the fireplace could be felt on their skin, bringing quickness to their fingers and ease to their hearts.

Something had thawed within that house. Something had thawed within Astrid.

Still, the girl had a reputation to maintain.

"If you tell anyone I cried I'll nail you to the torch post with carving knives," she stated indifferently as she tugged a thread through the hem.

Ruffnut spared her no glance. "I'm into it."

"I'll recommend you for stall mucking."

"Won't tell a soul."

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Though spring still lingered weeks away, Hiccup and Toothless were fortunate enough to experience a particularly mild winter day, which they both agreed was to be spent lazing around in the sun.

Hiccup currently sat cross-legged on a large rock with the map spread out in front of him and an apple in his hand, trying to plan where they would travel next. He took a rather large bite of his fruit and rubbed his chin as he surveyed his options.

They wanted to eventually get to Miklagard—_he had to at least see those walls !_—and it seemed that finding and following a prominent looking river would be the most secure way of going about it from where they were now. It would also ensure they would be near a body of water for the majority of—

::Get rid of it::

"What?" Hiccup asked with his hand falling from his chin. He looked up at Toothless to find the dragon sprawled out on his own warmed rock, glaring at him. Surely, Toothless didn't want him to throw out the map?

::That fur on your face:: Toothless elaborated with a terse tone. ::I want it gone::

Hiccup's hand returned to his face, feeling the sparse, slightly rough hairs under the pads of his fingers.

"No!" he said, aghast. Not wanting to sound too petulant (as well as wanting a somewhat sound argument on his side) he added, "It will keep my face warm! It's cold!"

And the hair was just starting to become visible in a watery reflection without him almost drowning.

::You just got that scarf:: Toothless pointed out, unmoved.

Hiccup pouted. "Yeah, but it still smells funny and I've already washed it twice."
He didn't know what was up with the funny smelling smoke all over the campsite, but it had stuck to anything of cloth they once had.

Either way, obtaining it had been good fun. Sneaking up on a bandit camp in the dead of the night and having a dragon throw fireballs at their feet from different shadows of the trees was one of their rare methods of acquiring goods the lazy way—and more necessary as the language barrier broadened. That and watching grown and hardened men run about squealing always brought a good chuckle out of him. Hiccup wouldn't be surprised if the woods they had been traveling through would have stories of being haunted before they made it to Austria.

Along with the scarf, he obtained a couple of more skillfully crafted daggers to add to his collection of valuables. He had fun working with the new balance of the weapons.

::And the rest is just as bad:: Toothless added, seemingly out of nowhere.

"What are you talking about?" Hiccup yelled, not caring if he attracted all sorts of trouble. "What rest? This is all I got so far! Do you know how long this took me?"

Hiccup took a particularly vigorous bite of his apple to emphasize how strongly he felt on the matter.

Toothless appeared unconcerned with the hardships of coaxing hair out of a jaw. ::I am built for speed...and you are starting to slow me down. I've held my tongue for far too long, but now it needs to be said::

"I'm not fat!" Hiccup cried, bits of apple falling from his mouth. It didn't matter that he couldn't help eating more than his usual share lately; he still couldn't seem to bulk up. If anything, he looked skinnier these days, his limbs stretching in only one direction and not keeping in proportion. His feet longer and sluggish, the back of his wrists bruised from all the times he miscalculated his armslength...

Sometimes he felt genuinely thankful he lived out of society and wouldn't mind remaining in the woods until he looked relatively normal again.

::I was referring to your hair:: Toothless said, sounding disgusted with the very word. ::It is ridiculous and pointless. Humans are hideous::

"Excuse me?" Hiccup gasped, affronted. Toothless pushed himself to his feet and approached the boy.

::What is the point to all this:: he huffed at Hiccup's face, blowing strands of hair into a mouth that had been partially open chewing. ::I understand elk and wolves and every other mammal, but you have dismal proportions here and there and then a mass at the very top. It's senseless. This is more pathetic than your square teeth::

Oddly enough, Hiccup couldn't fault Toothless for his opinion. If he were to look at humans as animals of survival, they certainly were bizarre. That didn't mean his best friend had to be so blunt about it.

He opted to give the dragon a flat look.

"My teeth terrify you. Don't try to say any different."

::You're getting rid of it:: Toothless declared once more, refusing to be derailed. ::If it's human females you're trying to attract, that won't help::
Hiccup began to bluster, "I wasn't—it's not—!"

He knew he shouldn't have told Toothless about those mermaids! Between them and the vördr, the dragon would continually make snide remarks regarding human mating rituals and how Hiccup was aiming at the wrong species.

"Fine," he finally groused. He couldn't grow a full beard yet anyway. "I'll shave...but I'm not cutting my hair!"

Cutting his own hair with his dagger hurt, and was time consuming, and would make him look more like a freak than he felt. He had enough self-confidence issues.

Toothless dropped himself heavily on top of the teen, causing the smaller male to cry out in dismay about his ruined apple.

::Well, it's a start::

Chapter End Notes

**The boots were the Seven League Boots. Arnulf the Great did expand westward and he killed William Longsword in the process, who was the son of Rollo—the first Duke of Normandy and a former Viking. Yay history!**

Astrid moment—her attitude wasn't completely explained in that, but that's because it was mostly from Ruffnut's POV.

The boys are currently in Germany. The horn will come into play soon. As will the river Hiccup plans to follow
"T-tyu-no..." Hiccup tried for the seventh time, tasting the word on his mouth. Below him, Toothless' ear-sensor flapped.

::I think it's Doo-nuh::

"No, I'm almost positive he said 'tuh-nuh'," Hiccup disputed. "No... tch... tuh-duh...deh-dyoo-no?"

The name of the large river they followed continued to escape him. Ever since a native of the land gave him a positive identification on the map, Hiccup had been trying to get his tongue to recreate the same sounds uttered to him.

In his defense, it was a rather brief and confusing encounter.

Hiccup all but shoved his map in the face of the last human they ran into—nearly two days prior—and continually pointed to the line of blue until the man understood what he was "asking". There were no English words traded between them. No French or Norse. Just pointing and repeated words in their respective languages, followed by more pointing and raised voices.

Through his travels, Hiccup gleaned at least one common factor among humans: no matter their origin, people universally shared the belief that speaking slower and louder would help him understand their language. It didn't.

::He was probably calling you a jackass:: Toothless professed. ::I bet it had nothing to do with the river::
"Go shed yourself," Hiccup returned with a phrase he learned from Toothless. "You don't even know what that means."

::Do too... loser::

"Belly-crawler."

::Bastard::

"Gimp."

::Wimp::

"Soppy-flamed worm."

::Son of a witch::

"Bitch works too," Hiccup pointed out.

::Oh:: Toothless said before trying the word, :Bitch::

"Soft-shelled hatchling."

::Simpleton::

"Dull scales."

::Baby face::

Hiccup's hands instantly went to his cheeks, patting the last of the baby-fat he couldn't quite seem to shake.

"...Dinky-winged, air serpent!"

::Oh no you didn't—!::

"Yeah, I went there. I'm not sorry—"

Hiccup was unexpectedly jerked to the side and he wasted no moment in thinking Toothless moved their bantering to a physical level. It was only through dumb luck and a blindingly bright sun that he managed to detect the same projectile that forced Toothless to dive in avoidance. They made a clean and quick evasion, allowing the thin, gleaming missile to bypass them at a good distance.

"Was that an arrow?" Hiccup asked. He turned in his seat, trying to spot the projectile that had just whizzed by him. It happened so fast that he started to question if it actually did.

::Watch it!::

Snapping his attention forward, Hiccup helped Toothless swerve around a second arrow. It shot past them, disappearing into the sun behind their backs. Hiccup found this a remarkable feat considering how high up they were, and acknowledged that the archer must have had impressive the arm strength.

"Where are they coming from?" he asked. No concern or apprehension stained his voice at being someone's target. The pair may have been exposed in open air, but they had speed, height, distance and just about any other tactical advantage on their side.
On the down side, everything below them was water or thick forests. There were no settlements on either side of the river—not any that could be seen through the congestion of the trees at any rate. It was the only reason that they decided to so brazenly fly that day.

Conversely, a lack of settlements or clearings meant they didn't have a place to land. No landing sight and arrows flying from the trees meant humans were nearby without any obvious pointers to their location.

::We should get out of the sky, just to be safe:: Toothless stated, making the same observations.
::There could be a whole army of them waiting down there::

"Well, we can't land near wherever the arrows are coming from," his rider replied. "Which...makes it difficult to figure out where to land..."

::Then let's pick up some speed and lose them::

"Sounds good to me," Hiccup grinned. Speed always sounded good to him.

They dove towards the lake at a side angle, plummeting so fast that Hiccup's eyes watered. He pressed his torso against Toothless' neck, stolen scarf wrapped around his neck, nose and mouth to keep the rest of his face protected from the abusive air. Their path was not a straight one—twists, spirals and fake-outs kept them from falling victim to a well-timed arrow. Hiccup let Toothless take control of getting them out of harm's way, his foot reacting to the dragon's body language as he observed the shores for any people or clearings.

"We should be good," Hiccup said, sitting straighter to indicate they should slow down. "They couldn't have kept up with us—unless they were riding dragons too."

Toothless fanned his wings, easing off the speed.

::Were we just hunted?:: he asked after a moment of taking in his new surroundings, which looked much like the portion of the river they just left.

Hiccup laughed, playfully flicking one of the small sensors between Toothless' ears.

"They probably thought you were a good-sized goose. You'd look good on a meal table."

Toothless responded by giving Hiccup a loving smack to the face by way of ear.

::I don't need to tell you where you'd look good::

"In the belly of a dragon?" Hiccup blandly ventured, rubbing his eye.

::Among other places::

"Hey! There's an island," Hiccup abandoned his face in favor of needlessly pointing to the long, narrow strip of land rising from the middle of the river.

Toothless, of course, had seen it, having sharper eyes. There were no bridges adjoining it to the mainland and the thickness of the trees were uninterrupted by any visible structures.

::Think it's safe?:: he asked despite all signs pointing to its uninhabited state.

Hiccup shrugged. "I see nothing but trees."

::That's what you saw when we were being shot at:: Toothless remarked, though he began
descending towards one of the tapered ends anyway.

"Well, our 'hunter' couldn't be on there." The arrows had flown from a different direction and whomever they belonged to were far, far behind them by now. "That's a small comfort."

The pair made a clean landing at the edge of the landmass and Hiccup hopped from the saddle onto stable soil.

"Wow...this is nice," Hiccup stated, admiring the lush greenery of the trees; some were still budding, but others had full blown foliage clinging to their branches. After a long, cold winter he could always better appreciate a plant of full plumage. The weather still held the chill of early spring, but the farther south he travelled the faster spring seemed to approach. Soon he wouldn't need the scarf to shield his face when flying.

Toothless snorted and helped Hiccup remove the saddle and luggage by shrugging out of the shoulder stirrups. ::It doesn't look any different from the mainland:::

Hiccup swung the basket over his shoulder and began to walk into the tree line.

"But I feel more secure here."

::We don't know what is on the other side::: Toothless pointed out, following the boy. From an aerial point of view nothing could be spotted. But in foreign territory where arrows fly at you from hidden locations in the trees, one could never be too cautious.

"I'm in the mood from some fruit," Hiccup decided out loud, seemingly ignoring Toothless' prudence. His eyes began to track his surroundings more shrewdly, on the hunt for certain fruit-bearing trees.

Toothless' snorted at the boy's one-track mind. His human could still multitask and was still an intellectual, but when it came to food these days he developed tunnel vision.

::I still do not understand how you can eat that::: the dragon intoned, sounding disgusted. ::It makes my stomach churn just thinking about that sickly taste. And the texture...ugh:::

He had tried a bit of apple before when he saw how Hiccup seemed to savor the taste. It would be the first and last time he ever attempted to devour a sweet plant.

"I think they're delicious," Hiccup sniffed. "It's not like I'll find any, anyway. It's probably too cold for any to grow... Still, I figured if we're this far south we're bound to see something different."

Toothless scurried up a tree as Hiccup spoke and began branch-hopping overhead. The branches groaned and the leaves rustled, but everything was too sprightly and young to be shaken down.

::It's amazing humans aren't much larger than they are, considering how your kind seems to be able to eat anything which grows under the sun:::

"I think it's to feed our brains," Hiccup guessed with honesty, comfortably ignoring Toothless' large shadow pass overhead. "It's not easy figuring out how to survive when the Gods completely shortchanged you on physical attributes."

::Well you've done an annoyingly good job of it:::

"Why, thank you."
Points of white caught Hiccup's eye, and he focused his gaze on a group of shadowed, unobtrusive trees, much deeper from where he stood, but still visible. Even from the shadows, Hiccup could see the small, white flowers sprouting from the offshoots.

He grinned. "Hey, that looks like—"

The breath was stolen from Hiccup's lungs as Toothless suddenly and roughly head-butted him to the ground. Hiccup winced as his thigh slid across pebbled and hard-rooted earth, tearing at his leggings and tunic. His basket had flown from his grip, landing feet away from him in the dirt.

"Toothless! What the—" Hiccup's eyes, once searching for the troublesome dragon, fell across an arrow embedded on the ground.

Approximately where he used to be standing.

Immediately realizing the situation, Hiccup scrambled to his feet at Toothless' backside. The dragon crouched before him, bent low in a spread-footed stance and growling at one of the trees.

For a bated moment (where Hiccup practically waited for another arrow to fly), he could only discern Toothless' low growls from the loud silence. Not even the birds and insects dared to vocalize.

Then a figure dropped from the tree Toothless had targeted, hitting the ground and then rising into a fighting stance all in the same, quick motion. An arrow was poised within a strangely curved bow like none Hiccup had ever seen before, and aimed at the human rather than the dragon.

The man wielding the weapon was garbed in even stranger clothes than the bow. A thick, long-sleeved robe—blue with gold embroidery—wrapped around the man with buttoning down the side. The slight bend at the knees parted the robe enough for Hiccup to catch sight of baggy pants tucked into plain-leather boots. A belt more intricate than Hiccup knew possible encircled the man's waist; metals and jewels decorated the surface of the leather, chain straps hung down from various loop on the belt, each one containing metal-lidded pouches or weapons, as well as a long-handled, small-headed axe. A quiver for arrows lay at his right hip and a sheathed sword at his left. A right-handed warrior.

An odd, pointed hat lined with fur around the base topped off the foreign dress. Beneath the hat was thick, matted, dark hair, several strands of which were braided and entwined with metal rings. He sported a longhaired goatee with a mustache that stretched beyond a strong jaw.

The man's face had a square element to it, with protruding cheekbones and tanned, weather-beaten skin stretching over the bone that caused Hiccup to place him in his forties. A pair of dark brown—almost black—eyes, small and slanted, glared at him.

"Közöljétek érkezéstek célját, vagy megismerkedtek a magyarok nyílaival!" the man growled. His voice had a deep, gravelly character to it that mixed harshly with such a threatening tone. If possible, the man pulled back on the bowstring harder.

Toothless growled and slammed a heavy paw on the ground. Hiccup read the dragon's body language as an inceptive attack.

"Toothless, don't!" Hiccup ordered. He wasn't comfortable with having an arrow notched at his face, but he knew any sudden moves on his part would be a lot more forgivable than any on Toothless'. Hiccup was impressed the dragon hadn't been shot already, as he made for a terrifying sight.

Apparently Toothless wasn't comfortable with the weapon aimed at Hiccup either.
"He fired at you!" Toothless spat.

"Maybe it was just a warning shot," Hiccup tried weakly. His eyes flickered to the arrow sticking out of the dirt, the head of which was completely buried. The arrow that had only just missed him thanks to Toothless' protection. Where would that have landed on him?

"Hogy kerültek erre a helyre?" The man snarled in sharp words. "Miféle bestia ez? Nem látjuk szívesen az idegeneket!"

"Oh shit," Hiccup swore softly, realizing whomever this was was most likely didn't speak Norse. Not if he hadn't reacted to Hiccup speaking, anyway. He glanced at Toothless, "How do you think we're going to get out of this one?"

::I take it negotiating isn't an option?: The dragon remarked snidely, also lost to their attacker's continued blathering.

Toothless was not worried about himself. Perhaps the man would get off the single, nocked arrow before Toothless took him down, but a single arrow could not kill the dragon...especially with his belly out of it's firing range. However, a single arrow would kill Hiccup, with his soft skin and two-legged posture that left all sorts of openings for disaster.

The man had ceased his diatribe soon after Hiccup spoke casually to Toothless. He had a mildly interested look mixed in with his unwelcome guard.

Hiccup took this as a sign that the man may be up for some charades and guesswork before things had to get violent. Unfortunately, Hiccup acquired a distaste for guesswork over the months.

"You don't speak Norse, do you?" Hiccup asked rhetorically. He put his hands on his hips, preparing for another session of point-and-yell.

He expected the man to say something slow and just as unintelligible as his earlier speech had been. Instead, Hiccup was granted the amusing sight of the stranger's eyes bulging in their sockets.

The man pointed to the horn at Hiccup's hip with tip of the primed arrow.

He swallowed heavily and said in a much quieter voice than the one previously used, "Ezt meg hol szerezted?"

Not knowing what was said, but understanding the blatant interest in the object, Hiccup put a protective hand on the horn. His grip unconsciously tightened when the man began to approach him in small, measured steps. Toothless increased his growls but the man would not be deterred.

"This is mine—" he started before realizing Norse wouldn't work. By habit, he switched to English. "Zis is mine."

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The man stopped his advance for a moment, perhaps digesting the switch in tongues.

"Where did you get ssat?" he spoke, his voice still hushed. The hard, mistrustful look on his face remained. His eyes only flickered up to meet Hiccup's every once in a while, preferring to concentrate only on the horn.

"It vas gifted to me," Hiccup returned, just as slowly. He felt awed that someone could speak English this far south. It was turning out to be the most useful thing he ever learned.

"By vhom?" the man demanded.
Hiccup answered with a similar quick tone, "Mermaids."

Another moment passed where nobody moved.

"Haf...may?" the man attempted, appearing completely lost.

"Yes...ah," Hiccup realized he didn't know the English word for mermaids. "Fish...maiden?"

Without realizing what he was doing, Hiccup had his hands cupped before his chest making squeezing motions while he swayed his body from side to side.

In spite of the situation, the man laughed; the lines around his face deepened and yet it granted him sense of youth. A change had rippled through his features, the caution rapidly receding and a different, unnamable look passed over his dark eyes. Almost calculating.

"Ah, I dink you are speaking of sse Sellõ! Such a tale!" the man seemed tickled by the idea. He gestured towards Toothless with a nod of his head. "And your beast, is he not safe?"

"He is a tregon." Hiccup, who felt remarkably safer himself after seeing the man crack a smile, stepped over Toothless' tail and placed a hand on the wide, scaled head. "His name is Toothless. No hahrting you."

After saying this Hiccup bent so that his face was level to Toothless'.

"Toothless, it's okay," he murmured in Norse.

The tension in Toothless' body did not lessen. Thin-pupiled eyes never left the stranger when he replied.

::He still has his weapon pointed at you::

"Well try making yourself look less threatening and maybe he'll move it," Hiccup suggested with more flippancy than he felt appropriate for the situation.

Toothless heaved a sigh that Hiccup was sure the archer could detect.

::This is one of your good faith hunches, isn't it?:: the dragon deadpanned.

"Yep," Hiccup smiled.

Toothless, indulging Hiccup once again, lowered himself to the ground in a resting position and made his eyes look as big and innocent as possible. He nearly lost his composure when, just as Hiccup predicted, the man lowered the arrow. He still had the bowstring wedged securely in the arrow's nock, and it would only take a second to pull it back into firing position, but it was a sight better than before.

Toothless held off the impulse to start banging his head on the ground; it was situations like these that encouraged Hiccup's determination to trust everyone and everything.

"I am Domokos," the man introduced himself with a slight bow of the head. "Nyék Domokos. Ssis is my land."

"Hiccup," Hiccup pointed to himself. "Sorry, ve vawnted erea to land."

"Hiksti," Domokos tried. "Ssat is all?"
“Zat is all,” Hiccup confirmed. He was a one-name man.

Domokos’ dark, shrewd eyes flicked between Hiccup and Toothless, often sweeping over the horn with barely concealed longing. At last he gave a short nod, seeming to have come to a decision. “If you and your friend, Tannlaus, promise to behave yourselves, I will allow you as guests.”

Hiccup brightened at the thought of being a guest. He could be sleeping in a bed for the first time in months! It had been so long since he resided in a human structure; too afraid of being separated from Toothless. But if he and Toothless were welcome...

"Sounds very nice. But you must promise to not harm Toothless," he set as a condition.

"Very well" Domokos agreed. He pulled the arrow from the bow and returned it to the quiver at his side. The final sign of a truce. “You can tell me how you came across that horn as you feast.”

####

Domokos, as it turned out, was quite a warm and genial character when unarmed. And Magyar. And an expert archer, horse rider, tracker...

"Truly! You struck and seen ran?" The man roared with laughter, slapping his knee.

"Is true. My thinking was zehl zere are too many guards to hit again," Hiccup grinned.

In the time Hiccup had been brought to a camouflaged tent (a yurt Domokos called it) and had a small drink called palinka shoved in his hand (which proved quite tastier to gillyale), Domokos had transformed from a hardened warrior into an easygoing and sociable host. In a lot of ways, he reminded Hiccup of some of the regulars at Berks' Mead Hall.

The yurt was circular, with a tall, conical roof leading to a smoke-hole in the center. The height of the tent was just enough to remain covered by the encompassing treetops, the brown and moss colors of the soft canvas aiding to its concealment—which explained why neither human nor dragon detected it from above. Rugs and tables and racks for hats and cloaks decorated the interior, all with similar embroidery to Domokos' garb and elegantly carved birds of prey on the woodwork. Weapons—bows and curved swords and shields—new and used, were strewn and propped about.

Currently, the smoke-hole was unused; Domokos insisted that they only enjoy the warmth of a fire when the sky darkened enough to cloak smoke. If Hiccup hadn't wondered before if this was some sort of hideaway, then he certainly wondered now.

Toothless was curled up on a particularly comfy looking rug, content to let Hiccup make a new human friend and looking for all the world like a large, scaly cat.

"One day, I will go behck and hit him again," Hiccup assured him. He only had one of the little drinks, and had taken his time sipping it as Domokos had, but he could tell the alcohol content must have been high. He felt warm all over and he had taken his cloak and scarf off a while ago.

Domokos refilled Hiccup’s glass, still shaking with laughter. Nodding, Hiccup brought it to his nose, mimicking Domokos again, and inhaled, scenting the light fruity aroma of pears.

"You are a very, very interesting man," the archer granted the youth. "I truly did not expect such stories from you. I would have thought those lies had I not met Tannlaus myself!"
Toothless flicked an ear in acknowledgment. Hiccup smiled fondly at the dragon and took another small sip of the palinka.

"I find myself having to believe you about sse Sellō as vell," Domokos continued. The smile remained on his face, but his eyes once again focused on the horn Hiccup had not felt safe enough to take off his person. The former Hooligan recognized the immense interest the man held for the object from the start. Even in the face of a Night Fury, Domokos seemed more concerned with Hiccup's acquisition of an instrument than his own safety.

Though it may have helped that Domokos wasn't a Viking and therefore wasn't raised to seek and destroy every dragon at hand.

"Why are you so interested in dis horn?" Hiccup asked. He hoped it wasn't a good reason; he really liked the horn.

"It belonged to my great, great grandfasser—and his fasser before him...and his fasser before him," Domokos answered, sounding whimsical and nostalgic as he swirled his palinka in his glass. Hiccup almost winced; lineage was usually a good reason for interest. Domokos continued, "It vas stolen from our clan very long ago, but ve vere told stories from sse time ve vere children. Stories of the Isten's eagle ssat may never be harmed, the heroic and generous lion ssat chose the nobles himself..."

Now Hiccup felt bad. He knew there had to be some truth to Domokos' claims simply because of the sheer amount of interest in a seemingly ordinary instrument. And the man knew of the symbols on it without having to inspect it.

Hiccup opened his mouth, intending to explain the horn's meaning to him, when Toothless sprung from the floor. Both humans' attention switched to the dragon, who now faced the doorway with his back arched. Black, spiked fins rose over the hill of Toothless spine like hackles.

"Toothless?" Hiccup switched to Norse. "What's wrong?"

"Is he sensing somessing?" Domokos asked his guest, not particularly expecting an answer. The man had a hand on the curved hilt of his sword.

::There's something...something that smells wet and...and rank::

An odd scuffling sounded from outside with a grating noise over lapping it—short, high-pitched, relentless—

And then a creature burst through the door, loud and irritating with incessant yipping, and skidded to a stop directly in front of the dragon. Toothless bent low, chin to the floor, and growled back at the beast.

Hiccup couldn't blame his friend for the hostile reaction. The animal was nearly unrecognizable as anything he knew of. Its coat of hair consisted of nothing but long, black dreadlocks, topped with a mushroom of dreads for a head. Just a muzzle was visible through the layers of thick, ropey hair, pulled into a snarl at a creature several times its size.

::What is it? What is it?: Toothless repeated hysterically. He looked ready to chomp the little beast in half.

Hiccup hurried in front of the Night Fury with hands held before his nose. "It's a dog! Don't eat it!"

Judging by Domokos' amused expression it was his dog. Hiccup did not need Toothless eating his
hosts' dog.

::Make it stop!:: Toothless demanded, trying to maneuver away from the shield of hands Hiccup had created. ::Why is it doing that?::

The dog altered between snarling and barking. It would back up, wiggling side to side as a low string of growls carried from its throat, and then hop forward with a series of high-pitched yips.

"It's threatened by you," Hiccup explained. He could feel a point in his temple starting to pulse and he rubbed it with two fingers.

::Well I'm threatened by it! It's hideous. It's fur makes less sense than a human's!::

Hiccup may have been offended if he hadn't been momentarily enthralled with Toothless admitting he was threatened by something as domesticated as a dog.

"And you call me dramatic," Hiccup muttered. Toothless hissed at Hiccup's detachment in the face of such a monstrosity.

::You can't even see its eyes!:: Toothless stressed. ::Does it have any?::

"Yes it has eyes," Hiccup laughed. He turned to Domokos,"Um, he hehs eyes, yes?"

With a wide grin, Domokos strode forward and hugged the dog to him with one, muscled arm. The dog calmed some, but still continued a steady growl in the face of the dragon. He pulled the hair back to reveal a dog's face embedded with angry, blue eyes.

"Is ssat sse problem?" Domokos asked. He regarded Toothless with far less reservation than before, perhaps feeling endeared by the silly reaction.

"Ssis is Tardos," he introduced the dog, who still squirmed every now and them in Domokos' grip. "It translates to 'bald'."

Hiccup grinned widely at the humor, aided by the hilarity of Toothless' antics.

"Nyughass, Tardos, nyughass!" Domokos soothed the dog. After a few good rubs to the dog's breast, Tardos finally calmed down enough to settle against a latticed-framed wall. Toothless, likewise, moved as far away as possible from the canine.

::I'm watching you, creature from the abyss:: Toothless directed at the dog.

Tardos barked.

"Domokósz?" A new, unfamiliar voice called from somewhere outside the yurt. "Mi idegesőtte fel Tardost?"

"Oh, ssis should be very interesting," Domokos sighed and sent Hiccup a helpless look.

"Who is zeht?" Hiccup asked. He kept his eyes on the door, hearing the crunching of leaves under boots grow louder.

"Solt," Domokos replied. "He is not one in favor of much change."

Hiccup understood this as "not liking visitors" just as a man ducked under the wooden doorframe. He had a similarly styled outfit to Domokos' but with a red and green color scheme. The addition of a short-leather vest, decorated with several metal buttons, drew attention to the man's tall, lean frame.
Hiccup realized this 'Solt' couldn't have been older than twenty-five, with skin fairer and smoother than Domokos, and a longer, leaner face—but still displaying the prominent cheekbones that seemed to be so common in these parts.

His hair was colored a lighter brown than his elder, long and plaited with comparable metal-ringed dressings. The eyes were only slightly bigger compared to the other Magyar, but narrowed so that the hazel irises could barely be seen as Solt zeroed in on the stranger standing next to Domokos.

Solt didn't even wait for an explanation. His hands immediately went to his head (subsequently drawing Hiccup's attention to the large bow hung over his shoulder) and gripped his hair.

"Domokősz!" Solt barked. "Beengédél egy idegent a szigetre?"

"Nyugodj meg, Solt," Domokos placated with a warning timbre.

Solt shook his head, content to keep up his tirade. "Honnan tudod, hogy nem a király embere—?"

"Solt..."

"Hajlandó lennél feláldozni a biztonságunkat a kíváncsiságodért? Várj, míg a többiek ideérnek, majd akk!"

The words flew from the man's mouth at such a rapid pace that Hiccup wasn't sure if he were speaking an actual language or making jumble of noise and anger and hand motions. He decided to keep back and let Domokos handle this.

Instead, he took another sip of his drink.

"Solt!" Domokos snapped, silencing the young man at once. "Nézz csak rá! Nem idevalósi, de még nem is a környező országokból. Nem tudja, mi folyik ezen a földön."

Hiccup did not know what Domokos said, but it kept Solt from immediately replying. Instead, the young man cast Hiccup a contemptuous look, his eyes sliding over the ratted clothes and wild hair of the stranger. Hiccup got the distinct impression that he was found wanting.

Solt opened his mouth at long last—probably intent on delivering a less than flattering report—when Domokos held up a rough-padded hand.

"Ve vill speak English now for sse benefit of our guest," Domokos stated. His tone left no room for argument.

"Wery vell," Solt muttered with so much moodiness that it was a miracle he managed to keep from pouting. He pointed a gloved finger at Hiccup's face, aimed right between his eyes so that Hiccup would know he was being addressed. "Ve do not need any more. Ve have no horses left for you."

"Uh..." Hiccup had no idea what Solt was talking about.

"As you can see," Domokos joyfully interjected, "our guest is no rider of horses."

And he swept his hand to present the third member of their party.

For the first time, Solt's eyes were drawn to Toothless, who had been skulking against a tent wall and staring at the man flatly. Solt yelped and jumped back. Hiccup concealed his chuckle within a cough while Domokos outright laughed.

::Jumpy idiot:: Toothless snorted.
"Démon! Az istenekre! E szörnyeteg egyenesen a Sátán birodalmából jött!" Solt obviously had some less-than-flattering things to say about Toothless as well, and he grappled for one of the shields leaning against the yurt.

"Nossing of the sort," Domokos said easily to whatever Solt had exclaimed. He strode forward and gripped Solt's forearm firmly. "Calm, my friend. Ssis is Hikstì and Tannlaus. Ssey are from sse far norss, farsser ssan our problems here. Ssey are friends."

Hiccup gave a cheesy wave. Toothless continued his impassive stare.

Solt wrenched his arm away from Domokos, keeping narrowed eyes on the pair of newcomers...but mostly on Toothless.

Hiccup watched the still heavily breathing Magyar lower himself to the ground, thinking Solt was simply trying to avoid fainting. But the man ended up grabbing the corner of a silver-tasseled rug and yanked it up, revealing a wooden trap door embedded in the dirt. He pulled it open and swung his feet into the dark hole.

"I am going to retire," Solt announced, descending in a manner that suggested stairs supported his body. "And when I return, ssey vill both be gone."

The floor door slammed shut over his head.

Domokos sighed, walking to the folded rug and kicking it back over the door.

"I apologize for him. He is filled vid suspicion for one so young."

::Why couldn't he have taken the dog?:: Toothless remarked at almost the same time.

Hiccup glanced at the Tardos who had taken the wall on the other side of the yurt to Toothless. The pair of quadrupeds had been faced off the entire time.

"It is fine," Hiccup answered absently, staring in bemusement at the rug. "Um...where does zeht lead, if I may esk?"

Domokos smoothed wrinkles from the rug out with his foot as he answered. "Ssat is our sleeping quarters. And hiding quarters for when ve need to be hidden. Ssis land lost its security long ago."

"Yes...I collected from conversehtions zeht your people are in a time of distress."

Domokos nodded, crossing his arms.

"Sse new king is meaning to 'Westernize' our people. Ssey are trying to force a new religion on us, trying to erase our vays, our traditions. Ssere are many of us who oppose ssis, but acting on such ssoughts leads to deass. Sse king vill annihilate any who try to cling to our vays; he believes ve vill hold him back form moving forvard."

Through his explanation, Domokos' face grew more and more aggrieved until the playful man of before had all but disappeared.

"You cennot liff in peace in your own land," Hiccup stated for him. He knew what that felt like. "I am sorry."

Domokos nodded in acceptance. "Ve vill get ssrough it," he declared. "Eventually."

Hiccup recalled something else Solt mentioned.
"And you have horses on the island?"

Ones that would not be shared, apparently.

This brought a small smile to Domokos' face.

"Igen. We take them here from time to time, but they live in one of our camps on the mainland. They are trained to swim across when we call and swim back as our ride to the mainland. They are our greatest allies in these times."

Hiccup's eyes grew wide. "Horses can to the sea?"

Hiccup had spent his life on an island straight out of Hel. They didn't let their horses swim in the ocean, where the water was rough and freezing. Well, not back when they had them anyway; it was hard to keep horses when they turned out to be a favorite snack for giant, dragon-controlling demons.

But to use horses as a means of travelling across rivers was clever and undetectable...and...

"I would like to trade you for that horn," Domokos stated frankly, cutting across all small talk.

Startled at the turn of conversation, Hiccup immediately drew the horn to his body, his fingers tracing the beautiful ivory carving. He knew this was coming—ever since Domokos first lowered his weapon in favor of getting closer to it—but he couldn't seem to bring himself to part with it.

It wasn't that Hiccup needed a horn, and he knew it embodied much sentimental value to Domokos, but mermaids gave it to him. They had to have given it to him for a reason, right? Gudrid even insinuated that he needed to figure out how to find the sisters—his vördr assigned to him by the Gods themselves—so there must have been a purpose for it coming to his possession.

Domokos frowned, noticing the boy's hesitance.

"I have many valuable items. Things of gold and precious metals. Things that would buy a new life in some lands," Domokos tried to sell.

"I travel light," Hiccup pointed out. "I have no plans of settling in a new land. And...I do not mean to sound...eh...difficult...but I am thinking that I have this horn for a special reason. A...ah..."

"A destiny?" Domokos filled in with a guess. Hiccup nodded. He didn't know the exact translation, but it sounded familiar.

And it may have worked, for it had the Magyar thinking; a thumb and forefinger repeatedly trenched through the long mustache, as though coaxing along an idea.

"Are you any good with a weapon?" Domokos prompted after a moment.

"I'm fair with a knife," Hiccup shrugged, gesturing to the dagger in his belt. Compared to Domokos' heavy getup of weaponry, Hiccup felt pretty insignificant.

::More than fair::: Toothless put in, knowing Domokos couldn't understand him. The dragon was still engaged in a staring contest with Tardos. Neither seemed inclined to surrender.


Hiccup shook his head. The dagger was all he really had going for him.

"I am more of a...eh, talker than a fighter." Hiccup paused for a moment and shook his head. "No, I
ride. I am a rider, not fighter."

That sounded much more accurate to him.

Domokos sat back on his heels, once more regarding the boy in front of him. Rather than looking putout, he seemed encouraged.

"You feel you were given ssat horn for a reason, were you not?" Domokos asked. At Hiccup's confirming nod he continued, "But you do not understand the importance of ssat horn to my people, you do not know its meaning to us in ssese times."

Guilt settled like lead in Hiccup's stomach. Even after trespassing on his land the man had still offered him hospitality, and Hiccup continued to hold onto this treasure for reasons he couldn't explain.

"I am sorry, I—"

Domokos held up a hand, much as he had with Solt, and Hiccup felt compelled to stop talking.

"I understand. But what if I traded one key to your destiny for anoder? I dink I know how to make ssis a fair trade for you and your beliefs. I vill give you something ssat vill have just as much meaning and even more usefulness. Somessing weightless, somessing ssat vill allow you to travel."

Hiccup was almost afraid to ask. "How is zis?"

"You are a rider," Domokos stated as though it were the greatest honor in the world. "But you do not know how to fight like a mounted one. Yet."

Chapter End Notes

And now we're starting to get to the heart of the story! Am I blatantly using English as a plot crutch? Yes. Yes I am.

When reading the part where Hiccup and Toothless practice insults on each other, I recommend listening to the Blue Danube. That's what I did. And I was giggling the whole time.

Thanks again to Fjordmustang for helping with name translations! (More like I stole most of them)

And a big thanks to Tanin for doing the real Hungarian translations. Thank you!

Next chapter has more Berk moments.
Tuffnut sat on the high hill, one leg bent up by his chest, the other stretched outward with a rocking foot, and watched as the first visitors of spring moored to Berk's docks. Traders. And headed by a brat too—one of those rich Englishmen from the south who wanted to branch out from under his father's wing.

Merchants and journeymen and apprentices from the lands below all milled about on his island, throwing their crafts and goods in the faces of Berk's populace.

Eventually he would stroll down there himself and see what they had to offer. His family's status was not anything to brag about—that was for sure—so he had little hope of acquiring anything of value.

Just as the disparaging assessment passed through his mind, Tuffnut saw a rack of delicious looking furs carried off of a ship. He licked his lips in wanting. Beaver...he swore there were beaver furs in there...

Of course, Berk had its own furs, from thin deer pelts to the colorful fox coats. But life on an island meant restrictions on hunting, as well as a short variety of land animals.

He racked his mind for anything he could purchase furs with. He only had a few silver pieces...some glass beads he could knick from his mother...though she'd kill him for touching her jewelry...

Maybe he could sell his sister as a slave?

No. His mother would be even angrier. She counted on seeing grandchildren in the near future and she never looked at him when she brought it up.

English words were shouted from below—words Tuffnut could not understand. He refused to learn other languages as it involved much reading and practicing: two things he hated unless they entailed violence. Not that reading came easy in the first place. It might limit his options in the future, but that's what bullying translators served for.

A young man caught his narrowed eye—the one leading the expedition—and Tuffnut nearly growled at the way he strode into the center of town as though he were a native returning from a long voyage. A spindly looking man scurrying close behind the pompous: a subordinate. One could tell by the way this man dressed, the way he held himself, that he had lived in privilege his entire life. Tuffnut would bet his favorite spear that the Saxon never once had to turn away from beaver furs due to financial problems.

Unable to stomach the unfairness, Tuffnut threw himself backwards onto the ground and pillowed
his head with his arms. He found the view of the lightly clouded sky far more preferable to that of the invaded island. If he kept his sight on the only piece of the world that Man couldn't claim, then his own limitations in this status-riddled society could be ignored.

Some day, some day soon, he'd be able to set sail on his own voyage with his own crew gaining his own treasure. He refused to spend his life looking at things with longing; they would come into his possession, one way or another.

The island had become a prison. He felt restless, and it could have been the long winter or the complete predictability of life that instigated these feelings. His inability to stand out on his own left him smothered—not to the village and not to his family. His father, a carpenter, hardly knew he had children, always working on his own projects or repairing the village; Tuffnut would be lucky to receive an acknowledging grunt from the man. His mother constantly fretted and complained about how her only two children turned out completely wrong. Sure, growing up they did their best to live up to their names—and it was encouraged—but people assumed they would eventually even out and develop other qualities. Like reason. Or empathy. Or a sense of propriety.

Nope. Rough and tough was about all there was to he and his sister.

A dark blob blocked his view of the sky, the sun helping to blot out any details of the silhouette towering over him.

"Hey nutless!" the profile chirped.

"Ah! Night troll!" Tuffnut hollered. He whacked a heavy braid of hair that hung over his head and received a kick to the shoulder for his actions. At least the blob moved and he was warmed by sun once more.

Ruffnut threw herself on the ground next to him, opposite, so that her head was near his feet.

"What are you doing up here, boil-butt?" She kept her eyes on the sky as she talked, sharing the view. "Aren't you going down to the docks?"

Rubbing his shoulder, Tuffnut sneered. "And do what? Look at all the things I can't have?"

His twin shrugged and yawned. Unlike her brother, she never put much stock into monetary gain. She was more about action.

"Why aren't you down there?" Tuffnut asked when he didn't receive a response.

"Already been," Ruffnut replied dismissively. Though she didn't go for trafficking interests. She didn't know why and she didn't know how, but somewhere between the last weeks of winter and now, Ruffnut fell into the habit of keeping an eye open for any of Berk's returning voyager ships. Ultimately, she knew she did it for Astrid; the girl needed a friend and, more importantly, a parent. Someone to look out for her. While Astrid had slowly integrated back into Berk's social lifestyle, it wasn't all smooth sailing. After the death of her mother, Astrid had to be coaxed into short bouts of mingling and participation in village life, which became more commonplace thanks to Ruffnut's efforts and spring thawing the misery of winter.

For the life of her, Ruffnut did not know where these feelings of protectiveness came from. At first she thought it was for her own benefit; so she wouldn't have to witness the sickening sight of someone as strong as Astrid give up. But then she wanted to see the girl eat more than bread and tea, she wanted to see some color back in Astrid's skin, to see her smile more and to bring back a sense of normalcy to their small generation. This type of compassion was foreign to her and sometimes she
felt frightened by it. For now she was trying to help an old friend get through a hard time, and she could live with that, but... what if it grew? What if, like a disease, she started becoming more and more concerned with others' feelings? So much so that she turned depressed with all the negativity and efforts—

"Nothing interesting, then?" Tuffnut's obnoxiously loud voice interrupted his sister's inner hysteria, ironically saving her from driving herself insane.

"Nah... the only interesting thing was when Ringworm and Cottonballs started arguing over the same silver necklace... you know how they're both trying to negotiate with Giblet's parents."

Giblet Hvalman's two older sisters had born three strapping sons each, and it was assumed Giblet would have the same potential. That gave the fifteen-year-old quite a bit of appeal to those seeking a wife.

Tuffnut laughed out loud at the picture, feeling almost sorry he wasn't there to witness it.

"Who won?"

"Nobody," Ruffnut grinned. "It got physical, scared a bunch of those milksop Englishmen and Stoick made them leave."

The pair relished in the moment, imagining the grumblings of the two men as they were shuffled away from the market. Twin heads of blonde hair fanned around their bodies, their moderately freckled skin soaking up unimpeded rays of warmth.

"Dad's gunna marry you off soon, you know," Tuffnut suddenly said with all the air of polite conversation. Knowing their dad, it would be for the sole purpose of having one less mouth to feed.

"Shut up, dimwit," Ruffnut muttered. She already knew this and picked at a blade of grass as the less-than-pleasing statement clouded her thoughts. "I'd have to say yes for anything to happen."

"Until you use up all your no's."

"...Think if I start sleeping around I'll get a reputation that will keep them off of me?"

"Them?" Tuffnut snorted. "They'd have to want on you first!"

Ruffnut swung her clenched fist out and down and into his vulnerably stretched out stomach.

"Oo—oo—oh," her brother coughed, curling in on himself. He appeared in enough pain that Ruffnut decided not to give him a second thump. She knew she had no suitors; she didn't need her damn brother pointing it out to her.

"You know," Tuffnut wheezed, catching his breath, "if you married Snotlout you could be the chief's wife, and that would—oh come on!"

His sister began making exaggerated gagging noises at the suggestion of marrying his best friend.

"He smells almost as bad as you," Tuffnut intoned with a short chuckle. "Besides, he's too young. He won't be taking the title until he's eighteen at the earliest... and the Chief won't think he'll be ready until he's, like, twenty—and by then it'll be little fifteen year olds that are being thrown at him. I'll be an old maid..."

"But if you marry him now you'll eventually be one of the elite," Tuffnut proclaimed, feeling proud
of himself for thinking ahead.

Ruffnut rolled her eyes. Her brother always went on about changing his status or improving the family's esteem, so of course he'd try to ride on whatever benefits she'd gain through marriage.

Though the same would go for the reverse. It came with the twin territory.

"He doesn't have any property or standing yet," she pointed out dismissively. "Even I have standards."

This included hygienic standards.

"Oh, listen to the yokel harp about standards!" Tuffnut laughed. He would never admit to the slight relief he felt in knowing his twin didn't want to bone his buddy. That would have been too weird for words.

"Well, if you're not married by next spring you can sneak away on my voyage," Tuffnut told her. He sounded as though he were granting her a generous reprieve.

"Your voyage?" Ruffnut scoffed. She lifted her head from the ground to look at his face, just to see if he was serious.

"Yeah, my, voyage."

Ruffnut settled her weight on her elbows so she could comfortably recline while she blew her brother's delusions to the water.

"If there were going to be a voyage then I would surely be leading it over you," she informed him.

"What!" Tuffnut squawked, swinging his torso up into a seated position. "My ass! I'm obviously more suited for leadership—"

"You got lost going to the springs for laugardagr!"

"I told you, I had been drinking!"

"Cheah! A likely story!"

"Even the chief's done it before! In fact, it's a sign of—"

"—Oh please—"

The twins continued to bicker, their voices across the village from the high perch. In truth neither really cared who headed their dreamed up expedition, as long as the other wasn't too far behind.

Spending eternity together on that island sounded like Hel. Being separated sounded worse.

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"Asking your pardon, sir—?"

Gobber jumped at the sudden voice close behind him. His hammer-appendage slammed down while he leaned too close to yellow-hot metal. Embers flew up, striking him in the jowls.
"Sons of Muspell," he hissed under his breath. He rubbed his newly scorched skin and turned. Two Englishmen waited at the shop window: one tall and willowy and looking altogether uncomfortable, the other young and blond and arrogantly immodest.

Gobber's scowl deepened. Damn lightweight English didn't make any sound when they approached. "Aye?" he greeted gruffly.

The tall man gulped, probably wishing he could be back among his normal-sized travelling companions. He cast a resigned frown at the youth beside him before puffing up and saying, "On behalf of Sir Earic, I ask for your services upon a weapon."

Gobber turned his flat gaze to 'Sir Earic'. The young man drew himself to his full height and stared back with light brown eyes. The lad had no chance in Hel of intimidating him, but bravado from a wimpy Englishman impressed Gobber all the same.

"All right" he grumped. "What seems to be the problem?"

He popped off his hammer-appendage as he approached the window with the high-pitched scratch of metal against metal. The older man jumped with a small shriek at the sudden sight of a mechanical amputated limb. Gobber couldn't keep the sinister grin off his face, his underbite showing off his unseemly metal tooth.

He grabbed his hook and twisted it on, enjoying the disgusted wince he received from both men. They might be annoying lightweights, but that made them all the more fun to scare.

"Sword," Sir Earic said strongly, recovering first. Grabbing a gold-swathed handle at his side, he drew a double-edged blade from the scabbard in his belt and revealed the notable chips in its blade. He needlessly said: "Broke."

The one-word explanations by someone so finely dressed explained why Sir Earic didn't ask for the service himself. The boy probably only knew the necessities in Norse.

"We ask that you repair the blade," Walter requested on behalf of his lord. "It means quite a lot to his lordship and we are hoping it is able to be fixed."

Gobber hardly looked at the blade, instead opting to give the pair before him a woody stare. "Pain in the...I got myself a backup of work to be done here," he objected. "It'll be a pain to throw this into the lineup."

"It will be well worth your time, I assure you," the man glibly promised. From an inner pocket of his cloak he drew forth a sack of valuables—coins, if the jangled thud of it hitting the counter were anything to go by.

Typical English behavior: throw money at a problem.

In typical Viking behavior, Gobber accepted, but not without another aggrieved sigh. Tossing the sack into a pile of crafted bolts, he grabbed the sword by its handle with is good hand.

In all honestly, he was getting too old to be handling everything by himself. He dearly missed having an apprentice. Not that he was completely without assistance; when things got too hectic he had a few roughly trained Vikings help him around the shop. Of course, not with anything needing skills. It was mostly heavy lifting—things Hiccup couldn't do.
He supposed he had gotten spoiled with Hiccup around.

When it was just Gobber himself, young and energetic, he could move about the shop with an adept ease and keep up with any orders—even during a raid. Then he lost his hand, significantly hampering his dexterity, and he had Hiccup thrown at him—though both he and Stoick knew it was more for keeping Hiccup out of trouble than for any relief on Gobber's part. Still, the boy learned fast and had a talent for finding ways around his own general frailty. Gobber grew used to having his work appearing right in front of him, things running smoothly, little trips from wall to wall being taken care of as he worked on a project. They had a good system, he and that boy.

And now it was just himself again, without his shadow, without his "third" arm, and without anyone who knew just when the bellows needed to be worked.

And none could do the detailing. Hiccup had a talent for making anything he touched unique...the boy would be better suited for décor rather than the disposable hunks of metal that Berk's Vikings found more practical. They were simply a practical lot. They had no need for eye-catching imagery or sentimental branding.

A lot like the one in his hand.

Gobber stopped before he could move any further into the forge. He looked at the sword—really looked at the sword—using the sunlight streaming in from the window to aid his vision, and swallowed.

"By Thor," he breathed. "Where did you get this?"

The translator's eyebrows rose at the change in attitude.

Gobber's awe showed in more than just his words, because the arrogant little prig crossed his arms smugly.

"Nice, yes?" He didn't look at Gobber or his sword, instead inspecting the bed of his nails and sounding like he expected the admiration.

"Ah," the translator said, "the young master received it as a gift from his father a while back. It is most beloved to him."
"Where," Gobber stressed the word again, "did you get this?"

He tapped the end of his hook on the counter, causing the translator to swallow audibly.

"Ah...ah...Hartlepool!" the translator gasped out. "Of Northumbrea. A blacksmith, local, forged it."

"Who?"

The man said something to his master in English.

"Thurgis. Smith," said Earic in a clipped voice. Now he seemed annoyed, as though he couldn't understand the delay in his repairs. Gobber couldn't give two hoots about the lord's impatience.

"Was there a lad involved in the forging of this sword?" he directed at the translator. Perhaps Hiccup had set himself up amongst Saxons...taking on an alias...

The translator relayed the question to Sir Earic, who shook his head and responded to his subordinate in his native language.

"Not that he knows of," the translator quickly replied. His eyes spent more time fixed on Gobber's hook than Gobber's eyes. "Thurgis is aged..."

Gobber's shoulder's sagged. His disappointment drowned out Sir Earic's English mutterings.

"But...the design is not of the smith's usual work," the man added, causing Gobber to perk up. "At least, it has never been seen on anything he has made before...it is possible he had taken on another apprentice..."

Despite the dubiety in the man's voice, Gobber could feel his heart rate pick up.

"You don't say..." Without a second look back he turned hobbled to the sectioned off room that once served as Hiccup's "studio". "I'll just be in the back here for a mo.'"

As soon he disappeared out of his customers' sight he let out a ragged breath and stared down at the weapon in his hand...from the carvings in the handle, to the angular cut of the blade...it all pointed to Hiccup. Gobber wanted to find another craft to compare for confirmation, but the sad truth of the matter was that very few weapons Hiccup solely worked on were left. Berk went through weapons like other villages went through firewood.

Gobber looked around the unusually clean workspace. He had saved a lot of Hiccup's stuff—what he could, anyway. He actually organized it. Piled papers, stacked books, rolled blue-prints for far-fetched ideas...

He simply couldn't bring himself to toss any of it. All of it was Hiccup.

He put his hand on the heavily dented desk, steadying himself, as reality washed over him. And this sword was Hiccup too; it was a truth he felt in his very bones. He was touching something that Hiccup had touched. Hiccup was alive—or at least alive when the sword was forged.

He was alive.

"Gobber!" a voice barked from inside the forge. It was the last voice Gobber needed to hear right now. Heavy footsteps approached and before Gobber could slip from the sanctuary that used to belong to his apprentice, the curtain was flipped back and the red-bearded chief of his tribe stepped in.
"Where have you been?" Stoick grumbled, "I've been havin' to settle these damn traders all morning."

"Oi, my English is shite, mate," Gobber replied with as little misgiving as he could. He held the sword lank by his side, partially behind his ham-like thigh.

"I meant for my own sanity," Stoick chuckled. "I'm needing someone to hold me back when I'm overcome with the urge to throttle one of them. Not good for business, you see."

"Ah ha ha..." Gobber weakly chuckled as he began to slowly move towards the curtained door while trying to herd Stoick out of the room. "Well then, I guess we best be getting down there. Don't want our tradin' buddies to think we're ill hosts...heh heh..."

He had just barely gotten Stoick past the threshold when he heard: "Say, what's that you got there?"

Gobber internally winced, realizing Stoick's attention was focused on the glinting sword partially obscured by his thigh.

"Och, this?" Gobber flashed it out in the open and then tucked it away behind him again, "Nothin' nothin'...just some last minute work I have to get done. Asked for by the brat over th—"

The kid and his nanny had disappeared. Probably high-tailed it down the hill when they saw the fearsome Stoick the Vast approach.

"Well I'll be damned," he stated, bemused. "They done run off..."

"Saxon make, is it?" Stoick scoffed, grabbing for the weapon, "let's see if it can stand to our swords —"

Gobber backpedaled out of Stoick's reach.

"Oh, it's crap—yeh know that," he nervously slid it in the corner of a workbench behind him. "But they're paying me good money to fix it up, so I might as well take care of it as I promised I would."

Stoick narrowed his eyes. He had known Gobber for far too long to not see a series of half-truths strung before him.

"Gobber," he said soft and steely, "hand me that sword."

Gobber waved him off, using his wide body to conceal the content of the table. "We don't have time for such nonsense, Stoick! Let's head down to—"

"Gobber!" Stoick used his no-nonsense voice. The voice that would get your ears chopped off if you so much as questioned it.

Gobber exhaled and stepped to the side, allowing Stoick to approach the chipped weapon. His shoulders tensed as Stoick lifted it, his eyes weary and focused on Stoick's unchanging face.

A part of Gobber realized that Stoick didn't know Hiccup as he had. He didn't pay much mind to Hiccup's accomplishments as the boy became a greater and greater menace with his inventions. Anything new or 'improved upon' by Hiccup was automatically labeled as trouble by the chief and thought better to be destroyed than considered.

"Gobber," Stoick began, his voice still low and even, "is this what I think it is?"

Hoping against hope that the chief would be ignorant to its significance, Gobber tried, "Ah,
Stoick slammed his fist into the worktable, causing tools to jump in their place and the wood to splinter beneath the meaty hand.

"Do you take me for a fool?" he roared. If the lord and his translator hadn't truly fled yet, they were sure to be gone with such a bellow ringing in their ears. Gobber stood his ground. While rarely a target for Stoick's rage, he did know a thing or two about surviving it.

"I have no confirmation if it's his work," Gobber quickly tried to placate. "I just saw the familiarity— I'm sorry, my friend, I didn't want to upset you—you seemed better with the fresh spring and I thought—"

"Thought what?" Stoick barked. "That after eight months time I would be past the loss of my son? That I would happily choose blissful ignorance in the face of accepting he still exists? That he's out there—that—"

Stoick cut his rant short by biting his lip. He appeared to be trying to gain some sort of control over his body.

Gobber let the man's rage wash over him, taking it in, listening to Stoick mention having a 'son' for the first time in three seasons.

"A don't know what to think, Stoick," the smith replied truthfully. "Who does? You spoke of traitors and revenge and then clammed up. You said you had no son, you said the dragons would be as good as extinct as soon as the ice melted."

Still shocked into anger, still breathing heavily through his nose, Stoick averted his eyes to the sword hanging in his hand with a bit more calm.

"I don't know what to think either," he said lowly, his head bowed.

He didn't know if he should be happy his son was alive or angry the traitor survived that long. He felt more disappointment in himself for being so conflicted after having an entire winter to sort out his feelings. Would he ever settle for a single opinion on the matter? Even after all this time, he couldn't help but feel that everything was left too open-ended—like instead of a goodbye or a certain ending to Hiccup's departure—they got a 'see you later' instead.

"I just don't know," he muttered again in a near whisper. He looked at his longtime friend. "Tell me, Gobber. I'm tired of trying to sort this out. Just tell me what I'm suppose to feel."

Odin forbid he ever have to face his son again...that he would truly have to decided between being a father and being a Viking chief while looking into Valka's eyes on their child's face.

"I think that you should feel this is more than a coincidence," Gobber said, catching Stoick off guard. Gobber was a storyteller but he was never one for serendipity.

"Think about it, Stoick," Gobber pressed, plucking the courage to land a heavy hand on the armored shoulder. "What are the chances? What are the chances that this sword would find its way to this island? This is a sign from the Gods that Hiccup's alive. I know it."

"But why?" Stoick looked lost, staring bleakly at the sword. "Why now? What's the point?"

Gobber shrugged.
"Your guess is as good as mine. In fact, considering all the uncertainty this has thrown us in, I'd say there's likely only one thing we can be certain of."

"what's that?"

"That's some damn good detailing."

Chapter End Notes

*Art by Bloodmoon14

** I don't want to hear any griping about Giblet and her son-birthing appeal. This is medieval Europe; they were dumb and superstitious like that. And they probably didn't understand much about karma.

And yes, that was a reference to AVPS with the night troll.

We'll see the training next chapter—I know some may be disappointed with the lack of action here.
I should have mentioned this before, but a faðmr is about a yard.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Again!"

Panting, Hiccup picked up the curved sabre that had just been knocked from his grip. Sweat trickled from his hairline, cooling the side of his face against the heat of exertion and the warm, spring air. He firmly ignored the vicious smile on the face of his taller opponent as he fell back into a stance.

Though Domokos mercilessly trained Hiccup in archery over the last three weeks, the Magyar warrior insisted that the boy gain sufficient skill in swordplay as well. Every other day Hiccup found himself being knocked around by a sparring partner as Domokos objectively watched from the sidelines.

Solt kindly volunteered to "spar" with him every time.

Hiccup already had the basics in theory, but practice was hard for him with the heavy broadswords provided on Berk. Using the thinner, lighter metal of a sabre gave him the opportunity to play out what he used to witness on a daily basis. The Vikings made sword fights a sport of how hard one could hit someone with a blade; the harder one hit, the less likely it was that an opponent would get up, thus creating the opportunity to move onto another victim. With the Magyar, speed and accuracy were more favored. Their swords were made for versatility—one-handed weapons for quick jabs and even quicker blocks.

Unprepared, if suited, for the new manner with blades, Hiccup soon develop a sore wrist from all the weight taken at different angles. It constantly turned in the motion of a dance, often times bearing the brunt more than his entire arm would after a work out. Domokos continually directed him to "lock" his wrist, but Hiccup had yet to figure out how to maintain a "locked" wrist under duress.

Hiccup knew he could not beat Solt—not when the other man had been wielding a sabre since he could walk. Still, Hiccup had been doing much better with weapon handling in general ever since Domokos caught him preparing to battle with a sword in his right hand.

...After he had been drawing the bowstring back with his left since the beginning of their training.

Naturally, Hiccup knew he was left-handed; he knew he wrote with his left hand and cut with his left hand. He knew he always felt the inclination to unsheathe a weapon with his left hand. But he fought for the pretense of being right-handed, with the exception of his dagger, which was small enough that no one would notice him wielding it.

Hiccup recalled the first time Astrid ever sent him the stink-eye; he was seven and had been playing around with a wooden sword. Left-handed. She loudly asked if he "knew which hand to use?"
ensuing much jeering at his expense from the others in his age group.

That was when he first learned of the vinstri stigma. The wrong hand: weak, lame, and not right. He, along with every other Viking child, was taught the same simple truth: the shield was held in the left, the weapon in the right. You didn't question things in Berk; you just did them. Desperately wanting to fit in, Hiccup followed that rule. Even though weapons felt clumsy and out of control at his right, even though he embarrassed himself countless times with his awkward handling. As long as no one saw as him as vinstri, then he could continue his tentative illusion of one day being a part of his village. After all, physical strength could be gained, but fighting habits were forever.

And now, years later, he was having his efforts of changing his preferences broken down. Domokos, with his hawk-like eyes, would pop up anytime he so much as reached for something with his right hand. His left hand was out of practice, his muscles needed to have their memory worked on and own his mind needed to have its inhibitions eradicated. It seemed like such a slow and tedious process when he kept getting beat by Solt over and over again, but if Hiccup could fix the damage done in trying to suppress his true self, then he could become the man he was meant to be...not the one Berk would have approved of.

He was a vinstri, and it was only one of the many things that could be considered wrong with him. He had to stop fighting it sometime.

The shuffle of Solt's boots kicking up dirt alerted him to the man's fast approach. Hiccup swiftly brought up the sabre, parrying a swing to the head. Solt would often throw his weight into a cutting blow such as that, and then had the remarkable ability to retract and redirect the force almost faster than Hiccup could counter.

Head safe, Hiccup turned his blade vertical and jerked his arm across his body, using only the most essential movements to block the fast swing to his right side. He had to focus more on stability than offense. He could take the hits and not cave as long as he was fast enough to parry before Solt slipped through his defense.

Solt backed off after the brief locking of blades and the two boys surveyed each other for a tense moment. Then he lunged again.

"Attack Hiksti," Domokos instructed from somewhere out of his sight.

Hiccup realized that perhaps he should have taken that opportunity for his own shot at offense, but the time to dwell on that possibility did not exist. Relentless in his attacks, Solt kept Hiccup from lamenting on a moment wasted by forcing him to focus on self-preservation. Hiccup hardly noticed being pressed backwards, too distracted with keeping his head on his neck to see the line of trees he
A shock went through his body with every blow—at first, nothing more than jolts, and then growing as the spar went on until Hiccup wondered if his arm wouldn't fall off with the next hit. Domokos often pointed this out as his main problem with swordplay; he did not attack at openings, and he did not choose evasion over blocking when the opportunity arose. A bad habit that often led him to being worn down too early into a fight.

With a piercing war cry, Solt managed to knock Hiccup's sword from his slackening grip and in a follow up movement jabbed at Hiccup's unguarded body. Hiccup stumbled backwards to avoid the weapon and ended up catching his heel on a root. He fell to the ground with a pained grunt. A second later, he was looking down his nose at the blade poised at his face.

"Enough!" Domokos shouted, ceasing the fight. "Ve Vill eat now. Tünde and Ráska have prepared boar. Hiksti, ve vill vork on bow vork later."

Hiccup nodded, chest heaving. He wiped dirt from his mouth and slowly made his way back onto his feet. Solt returned his sabre to his belt with a quick wrist movement and headed towards the stables without a backwards glance, a smile on his tanned face. Solt always looked happy after they sparred.

Probably because he always won against the foreigner.

Hiccup was slower in his movements; as the heat of battle cooled from his blood he became more mindful of strained and exhausted muscles throughout his body. His arms took the most damage throughout his stay with the Magyars; be it archery or sword fighting, it was all on the opposite end of the spectrum compared to his past exercise of running and flying.

Still breathing rather heavily, Hiccup made his way into a small yurt where excess weapons were stored. The clearing he had spent his time practicing weapons on served as training ground located deep into the mainland. It wasn't used much by the older crowd, but children would often come by for instruction or practice. In fact, Hiccup would wager that he was the oldest trainee currently using it.

He dropped off the sabre next to a couple others—all of which belonged to deceased and extended family members with no immediate heirs—and promptly left the grounds with his mind solely on food. He began the moderate walk to the stables where Toothless liked to haunt during Hiccup's 'human time'. For some unfathomable reason, the dragon loved to lie on straw. He found it just soft enough to draw him into sleep, but able to itch his belly when he wanted to. Personally, Hiccup couldn't see the appeal in the bedding, but then he didn't have scales.

Toothless also claimed the horses were good company, even if Hiccup didn't believe the dragon could communicate with horses as they could with each other. Still, the boy was more thankful that Toothless didn't feel abandoned with all the time he spent with Domokos as of late.

Hiccup followed the thinly visible path with a tender limp; the back of his ankle had begun to pull with each step and he could only chalk it up to the amount of lunging he had to do during the last portion of training. He tried to keep his mind tuned into his surroundings rather than the pain. This was one of the more recent instances when he walked through the woods unguided by one of the Nyék clan. Hopefully he'd make it to the shores without getting lost or he'd never hear the end of it from Domokos.

Domokos' clan settled in the lands nearly fifty years ago when the number of their members grew too great to resume their nomadic ways. Realizing the lands, while rich for agriculture and hospitable for
humans, were in a time of cultural war, they took precautions to their survival. Numerous, hidden camps were mapped along the shore, into the mainland, and on the island. At night, many of the clansmen slept on the island in the underground bunker while their horses were kept in a stable a short ride from the shore. They were determined to see the war through to the end.

They had paths from camp to camp, but ones that were really only useful to those who knew where to look. And while gaining some confidence in his ability to navigate the forests, Hiccup still felt relieved upon seeing the long wooden structure housing dozens of horses.

He entered a barn constructed to be just low enough to make use of the tall, surrounding trees, and immediately noticed Domokos and Solt had already left, their horses missing from their usual spots.

Hiccup waved to a couple of familiar barn hands that were on duty—a shift that constantly rotated throughout the day among all members of the clan.

"Hey buddy," he called upon spotting the out-of-place, dark mass that was Toothless. "Want to get some food?"

The Night Fury opened his jaws in a mighty yawn, his split tongue furling back into his mouth.

::The Humans don't want to share with me:: Toothless stated indifferently, though he picked his body up off of the straw anyhow.

Several of the Nyék clan, including Domokos, thought Toothless an awesome creature to be respected. And several did not. Still, it was more than either of them hoped for when they chose to openly camp in a human settlement.

"We'll do some dive-fishing," Hiccup promised as he grabbed the saddle and harness propped up against a stall wall. He ignored the stares from others present—far too used to the reactions to his seemingly one-sided conversations in Norse.

::Okay by me:: Toothless shrugged and he stilled to be fitted. The dragon usually hunted his own game in the forests whenever he was hungry, but the pair still preferred to eat together.

Despite Solt's and Domokos' head start, Hiccup would make it to the shoreline campsite long before they did. Solt may have Hiccup on skills, but speed was the former Viking's forte.

"Szia!" he waved farewell to the stable help. He and the dragon were up in the air before either of the mucking Magyars could raise their hands in a dumbfounded response.

The boys banked with the air currents, speeding over the treetops and turning the sight below into a blur of green as they rapidly approached the river. They passed a pillar of smoking rising from a clearing about a hundred faðmr in from the shore. That was where the boar cooked.

His mouth watering at the thought of meat, Hiccup tightened his grip on Toothless with his legs and pressed down, urging the dragon to begin the dive. They pitched towards the river, the late sun painting the waters in hues of orange and yellow.

::You're going to get a little wet:: Toothless warned with hardly any time for Hiccup to change his mind.

"It's fine," Hiccup got out before Toothless met the water with an open maw.

They did not submerge fully but Hiccup could feel the sudden sogginess and cold all the way up to mid thigh. The sensation hardly registered as they burst upward in the same quick swoop, a shower
of water lagging below them like a cape.

::Again?: The dragon asked as soon as he finished swallowing the two fish he caught. The innocent hope he forced into his tone was unnecessary; they both knew Hiccup would cave anyway.

The boy chuckled and flicked his foot for an abrupt turnaround. The wind stung his cold-saturated pants and he turned his mind on the warm meal he would be receiving soon enough.

"Hurrá!"

"Ezaz!"

"Még egyszer! Egyszer!"

Excited shouts of Magyars catching sight of the diving pair floated up to greet them. Whether they trusted a dragon in their camp or not, no one could curb their awe of seeing the pair fly together.

By the time Toothless declared his meal satisfactory, Hiccup's pants were weighted with water, and his sleeves and bottom half of his tunic were damp. The discomfort of his clothes really came to attention when he dismounted Toothless at the site of the roast and had to walk. Hopefully he would dry out a bit before he went back to training, otherwise he would be sure to develop some sort of rash.

A short, round-faced, and generally pleasant girl named Katul waved the pair of boys over as soon as Hiccup de-saddled the dragon.

"Here! Here, Hikst!" she called and patted an empty spot by her hip. Of the twenty or so diners currently sitting around the fire only a handful spoke English—Domokos' family, really, but the rest were nice enough to him. At the very least they thought he had merit as entertainment. They had all witnessed him smack himself in the face with an arrow at least once.

On Katul's other side was her bother, Solt, who pursed his lips for a moment before hissing:

"Megállj! Ne hozd ide!"

"Edd meg a húst," his sister shot back snidely before smiling at the foreigner who had chosen to take up her offer.

Hiccup didn't need to know Hungarian to understand the gist of that familiar exchanging of words: "Don't talk to him!" and "Butt out."

In spite of repeatedly getting his ass handed to him by the taller boy, Hiccup did not feel threatened by Solt outside of training. He was sure it wasn't something personal that continually offset Solt against him; the fact that he was a foreigner to them proved enough to warrant distrust. Hiccup could understand this attitude for a man who grew up trying to defend his culture against half of his own nation. Solt probably didn't trust his own neighbor.

Ignoring Solt's petulant moue, Hiccup settled down next to Katul who passed him a plate of meat.

"K-köszönöm," he thanked her in one of the few phrases he learned of Hungarian. She smiled delightedly, showing off the barest hints of dimples.

Toothless curled up, back-to-back with Hiccup, giving the boy a prop to lean against. Before he could take his first, highly anticipated bite Katul had already begun talking.

"Did you learn much from nagybátyám?" she warmed with. Hiccup learned early on that
nagybátyám was a term she referred to Domokos, her uncle, as. "Solt said you are not improving much but I do not believe him. When will you start fighting on Tannlaus? Is he very bored?"

"—eh—"

"How did you get vet? Did nagybátyám do ssat to you?"

"Katul!" Domokos called from across the fire. "Let sse boy eat."

Katul pouted and fell silent for all of a breath before whispering from the side of her mouth, "When can I ride Tannlaus?"

There was nothing stealthy about her whispering, and Katul steadfastly ignored the flat stare her uncle cast her from the other side of the camp. Several of the other diners snickered, even the ones who understood no English.

"Hey Toothless," Hiccup said over his shoulder in his own tongue, "You up for giving rides?"

::No::

Grinning, Hiccup turned to the girl.

"He is not reaty for ozzer pessengers yet. Maybe someday."

::You're a cruel, cruel human:: Toothless informed him. ::Stringing along little girls like that...::

Hiccup was able to keep a light smile in the face of Katul's fallen expression.

"Keep hanging out with those horses. You might change your mind," he muttered to the dragon and tore another hunk of meat from share with his canines. His attempts at being discreet were far more successful than Katul's.

::I will bite you::

Hiccup moved his hand behind his back and flicked the dragon's dark hide.

::::Ow::::

A one-finned tail lashed up from behind and rapped Hiccup over the head. He nearly dropped his plate at the sudden assault.
"Is everyssing alright?" Domokos politely asked, though, going by the wide smile on his broad face he held back laughter. Looking around, Hiccup saw that most of the eaters were shaking with silent giggles before he realized they probably had witnessed a random dragon attack on his person.

"Oh yes," Hiccup assured, rubbing his head.

He prepared to deliver a sharp elbow into the lazy body behind him for his trouble when Tünde, Domokos' sister and the mother to Solt and Katul, spoke.

"Hiksti, I am almost finished viss your nadrág," she informed him. Tünde resembled her brother in many ways, with similar eyes and bone structure, but she did not have the body of a hardened warrior; she was a short and slightly plump widow who spent most of her days helping to prepare meals and clothes for all of the tribe. But she and her brother both shared the same laugh lines on their faces and both had a penchant for being easily entertained.

"Ah, köszönöm...very much." Hiccup ducked his head in appreciation. "You did not haff to do zis for me."

Tünde waved off his gratitude. "It vas nossing! Ve cannot have you living in ssose for much longer!"

Hiccup's current clothes—even when dry—were a spectacle. Over the course of his training they had steadily become riddled with small tears and strained seams. It didn't take long for Tünde to insist on making him new clothes, and no amount of protesting would deter her. Hiccup just managed to stop her from making Toothless a matching outfit. Getting the dragon to wear a harness had been hard enough; Hiccup didn't want to think what would happen if someone tried to make Toothless wear a tunic.

"I helped anyu," Katul was quick to enlighten him. Hiccup turned his gracious smile onto her.

"I am sure you haff done a wunterful job," he said kindly.

Katul took this as her cue to launch into an account of every detail she aided in.

"Ugh Katul..." Solt groaned, rolling his eyes. Katul ignored him with ease, not losing a beat in her stream of chattering.
Hiccup listened to the younger girl as best he could, not understanding all of the terms both to his ignorance in needlecraft and Katul's habit of using Hungarian words.

Mostly his attention was directed at the food on his plate and his uncomfortably wet butt.

"No, no, no...you load the next arrow too slow!" Domokos critiqued almost as soon as Hiccup launched the second arrow.

Hiccup dropped his arms to his side, the curved composite bow hanging limp and parallel to his leg. His attention wasn't on the teacher who approached him from the side. It was thirty faðmr from where he stood, on the target carved in the trunk of a tree. The target bore an arrow on the mark and a second far too high.

He usually preferred his archery training to anything else Domokos might have him do. Sometimes he got instruction from other clan members—those who spoke English—but Domokos had taken full responsibility of obtaining that horn, which meant he tasked himself with measuring Hiccup's success personally.

Hiccup had used a bow once before meeting Domokos back when learning how to hunt in his birth village. But notching the arrow far enough to make any shot useful took far too much strength for an undersized child, and his father soon snatched the instrument from his grasp before he put another arrow through the paces.

Hiccup had come a long way since then: he grew into the size of the bow (bows which seemed much longer than he recalled Vikings ever using) and his arm strength grew by the day. Under Domokos' expert instruction he first learned form, then strength, then aim. He alternatively worked on his distance and precision, moving onto farther targets as his accuracy held constant.

Hiccup could confidently say he showed competence with a bow, which was a far cry from anything he used to be. Still, he had a long way to go if he ever hoped to match one of the Magyars...and that was on foot. They hadn't even talked about riding Toothless and firing. It did not look like anything that would be on the horizon considering how his current project of increasing his speed while maintaining accuracy gave him so much trouble.

"I do not know what happened," Hiccup said in a lame defense. The first arrow always struck within the target—even if at the very edge—but the faster he nocked the second arrow, the more awry its landing.

"What happened is you lose focus after seeing you got one right. You never leave your bow empty until you know your opponent is dead." Domokos berated his student.

Hiccup looked at his "opponent"—the tree—and sighed. He understood where Domokos came from, but he still did not understand the point in focusing on speedy "follow-up" arrows. In the time it took for Hiccup to draw one arrow, Domokos could launch three and have all of them strike true. It seemed so far from what he was capable of that Hiccup felt more disheartened than awed.

"Baht at least I hit one...right? Does ze first shot count for nozing?"

Domokos' hands went to his hips. "One does not go into battle planning to strike once and be done
"Of all the... *why zis one?*" Hiccup asked, not for the first time questioning how Domokos came to the conclusion of matching him with archery. He shook the bow a little in his hand, still believing it was not the weapon best suited for him. Archery required a combination of strength and endurance that Hiccup felt would always be out of his reach. He had more experience with small blades.

Domokos placed a leathery hand on Hiccup's shoulder. Though slightly taller than the older man, Hiccup could feel the raw power in the grip of those fingers.

"It is not sse veapon ssat is failing you right now. It is you who is failing sse veapon," Domokos apprised him. Hiccup stared vacantly back.

"Ah, yup..." he deadpanned after a beat. "Of course, now I haff gone and ahpset a veapon..."

Tutting at the sarcasm, Domokos took the bow from Hiccup's hold and ran a calloused thumb up the leather bound ridge. He shook his head, thin braids swinging amidst the mass of shaggy hair, and he met Hiccup's eyes.

"**You must move to your strengsss,**" Domokos stressed. "**Ssis is right for you.**"

"**What strengths?**" Hiccup jabbed. Since he arrived, there had not been anything he excelled in.

As if to disagree with his very thoughts, Domokos did not hesitate when he said: "**You learn quick, you move quick.**"

"**Baht I am not quick viz zis.**" Hiccup roughly gestured to the bow that Domokos now carried. "**I am better with a blade! Why could I not learn to master zat instead?**"

The Maygar shook his head solemnly. "**It is not right for sse path you have chosen.**"

"**What...what does zat even...?**"

"**Sse...Náttfari...**" Domokos struggled with the translation for 'Night Fury'. "**You say he never misses?**"

Hiccup nodded, recalling how he described the dragons he had encountered in his life using the laughable Viking terms.

Domokos poked the boy in the chest. "**Ssen, if you are to be his partner, you must never miss.**"

Hiccup refocused his eyes on the dark man in front of him, retracing what was said in his mind.

"**What?**"

Domokos licked his lips, struggling with how to get his point across. This was one of many moments that both men acknowledged how much easier conversation would be if they were not in need of a middle language.

"**You say you chose each osser,**" Domokos started again, still unsure if he was conveying the right message. "**Ssat you and Tannlaus saved one anosser from sse lives you vere trapped in, yes? Now ssat you are togesser you have forged a new vay of life...an odd life unknown to eisser of you before. You have a responsibility to complete each osser. Do you understand me?**"

"I... I tink so..." Hiccup's eyes fell to the bow in Domokos' hands. Toothless gave Hiccup a way out of Berk, Hiccup freed Toothless from the demon's mind control. Hiccup adopted Toothless' nomadic
culture, Toothless adapted to Hiccup's passive approach to obstacles. Neither knew it was possible to live in unity with one of their species before—not on such a close basis. They had spent the last months redefining what they did know. This new territory was explored together; they didn't know where they'd be accepted or how to define what drove them, they just kept moving forward. Though the air.

But there was still that element of distortion that could be felt...that niggleing insecurity where Hiccup still felt the need to bring himself closer to Toothless' level.

Slowly, Hiccup's hand reached out towards the bow, palm up, as everything started to clear for him.

He wasn't doing this for himself; he was doing this for Toothless. They needed each other to fly...but why should Toothless be the only one fighting?

Filled with a new resolve, Hiccup met the Hungarian's dark eyes and nodded.

"Yes. Right."

Domokos' pleased smile deepened into a broad grin and he slapped the bow back into Hiccup's possession.

"Good. Now ssat you understand why you need to understand how. Your biggest problem is your form. It relaxes after your first arrow. Here, balance is key. Ssrough the core, ve are all balanced. Ssis is good for you because you have a very strong core."

Hiccup's inspiring moment halted at Domokos' next bout of confusing speech.

"Me?" He complimented the word with a finger pointed at himself. If Domokos meant what it sounded like he meant, then Hiccup would surely laugh. "I am probably ze most unbalanced person you vill ever meet. Nei! I am ze most unbalanced person you vill ever meet. It is a fact, not a sahggestion. You are viz people who...who...stand on horses moving at full speed!"

He'd seen it.

"In habit, only," Domokos said, sounding assuring. If possible, Hiccup was left more confused.

"What?"

Domokos spoke his next words slowly, "You walk as you are expected to walk. But you fly as you are. You see?"
"No," said Hiccup shortly.

"Do not walk. Fly. Let it be your only movement."

"Uh, okay, baht Toothless is still——"

"No. No Tannlaus." Domokos cut him off. "I have seen you fly, Hiksti. You have very...advanced balance. You carry yourself very well."

"Baht I don't carry my body at all," Hiccup argued, genuinely confused. "Toothless carries me."

Domokos was shaking his head the moment Hiccup said 'but'.

"You do carry your body—you would not be able to move with such agility up sserel if you did not. It is sse same for any rider...you keep yourself lifted; we carry ourselves as much as the horse carries us. Dead weight is a dead rider."

Hiccup realized everything led back to being a "rider"—the archery, the balance... He had to wonder if riders were meant to train him since the beginning. Was the mermaids' gift of the horn for this purpose?

"Okay," he said. "How do I "fly" when I am not on Toothless?"

As if waiting for the question, Domokos immediately began his assault, starting with putting a hand on Hiccup stomach, another just above his butt, and then physically pushing his hips forward. Hiccup didn't make so much as a squeak, too shocked at the forwardness.

"Tailbone tucked under! Back straight. Head up——" Both hands went under Hiccup's jaw and pulled upward, stretching the neck. Domokos immediately pressed on the shoulders that tried to rise as well. "Shoulders down. Tight!" He pushed on Hiccup's stomach hard, causing the boy to rock and almost undo all of the previous instruction. "You must be tight here! Ssis is how you fly. Keep your weight under you."

Hiccup was almost too afraid to move for fear of breaking the posture that he had just been forcefully molded into. He tried to memorize the feel of it as well as discern whether he felt like this when he flew. He didn't; he felt control when he flew—control over himself—not trapped.

"When you fire you do not move your body. Only the arms. Then only move arm for second arrow. Do not move stomach, hips, or even shoulders. Keep your face to your target."

Hiccup tried his best to follow the instruction as he turned his body appropriately to the target. He felt like he couldn't breathe properly and his chest felt tight when he bent his arm towards the back quiver to select an arrow. He hoped it was something that would only get easier with practice.

He nocked and fired the first arrow with a growing fluidity, using his thumb to draw rather than two forefingers—a practice he found far more effective, particularly with the use of a bone ring to keep the string from digging into his skin.

Hiccup's arrow managed to hit within the target just shy of dead center. Now that he was conscious of what Domokos expected, Hiccup kept his focus on the alertness of his body, hardly taking into account of what happened with his fired arrow. He concentrated on maintaining the tight—almost restrictive—control over his torso as he reached for a second arrow, mindful of keeping his speed from lagging; he didn't sway and didn't dawdle with readjusting his aim.

The second arrow wasn't in the target, but it was close, just above the border. This time, instead of
feeling discouraged for not making two targets in a row at an accelerated speed, Hiccup found energy in the marked improvement. He could sense the advance in obtaining total body control and he wanted to try again and again until he got both shots in the center, knowing it could be done. Then he wanted to do it even faster.

"Excellent," Domokos praised, sensing the change in enthusiasm. "When you get ssree in sse target at ssat speed, ssen ve will put you in motion. On Tannlaus."

Hiccup grinned at hearing the goal—though he didn't know how Toothless would feel about having him on his back while armed and actively firing.

"Nine. " he said, suddenly.

Domokos, who had begun to move to the tree to retrieve the arrows, paused.

"Nine?"

"Nine," Hiccup confirmed. It was triple the stipulation Domokos just gave, but he knew he wouldn't move onto mounted archery until he could shoot nine, successful arrows in rapid fire.

A match for each of Toothless' fireballs.

Chapter End Notes

**Art by Fjordmustang

Also, thank you to Tanin for the Hungarian translations and thank you, again, to Fjordmustang for the Norse translations! Probably the only parts that are going to make sense.

Thanks for reading!
Placing one foot in front of the other, Hiccup kept a steady breath as he traveled the length of a fallen tree caught several feet high in the branches of its neighbors.

In a seamless flow, his arm loaded and released arrow after arrow, sending each bone-tipped head into the same mark at different angles.

"Gah!"

The last arrow—the ninth arrow—sank into the tree naught a fingernail's width from the edge of the target. Hiccup dropped his head back and groaned.

"You are too hard on yourself," Domokos called from where he casually leaned against a tree. "You are more ssan ready to attempt mounted archery."

"I said nine and I am going to do nine," Hiccup announced firmly. He twisted the bone ring on his thumb, loosening the sweaty skin from its fix.

"Ócsém...If I had known you vould be ssis strict about it I vould have kept sse limitation at dree," Domokos joked.

Contrary to his words, the man felt only pride for his pupil.

Domokos taught many students in his life, some to success and others to none, and through all his experience as an educator he could confidently say that an individual's ability to embrace knowledge was as unique as their own personalities. He had to know a student before he would be able to truly teach them anything with some semblance of prosperity.

Hiccup, Domokos discovered, was a man of practicality—someone that couldn't be told to do a task and then expected to comply without question. Hiccup had to find the meaning in something; there had to be a direct point or purpose before he would willingly commit himself. For this, some may Hiccup an impudent student... but once a justification was established the floodgates to an ocean of determination and integrity were opened. Bringing the boy's bond with Toothless into the equation had instituted the motivation Domokos knew had been there the whole time, and Hiccup began to absorb the art of archery like cotton to sweat.

What Domokos hadn't expected was the sheer stubbornness that came along with it. Hiccup refused to cut himself any slack until he reached and perfected his own objective. Domokos saw it as proof of the Viking within Hiccup—a quality Hiccup refused to acknowledge existed.

With an eyeroll at Domokos's jab, Hiccup walked the line of his makeshift balance beam. The young
tree bore a diameter only wide enough to fit the width of his foot. Hiccup found that if he were
forced to engage his balance at all times, he learned control over his aim faster.

"Is Tannlaus ready for it?" Domokos asked, still smiling at the poise the Northman managed to
maintain.

Hiccup couldn't help the rueful shake of his head. "Eh heh...yes. Toothless is fery...interested."

In truth, Toothless was both enthused and wary by the idea of Hiccup firing alongside his bolts, but
promised to reserve judgment until they actually tried it out—something that would never happen
until Hiccup officially mastered the bow enough to nail nine consecutive marks. While moving.

And he was so close.

Back at his starting point, Hiccup nocked another arrow and ignored the weary sigh from his host.
Domokos thought he was more than ready for the next step, but Hiccup wanted to have a more
influential say on his own progress.

"This time," Hiccup mumbled in his native tongue, "This time, for sure."

A Night Fury never misses. Neither will his rider.

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The air was still, much as was the water, and Hiccup felt sandwiched between the full, yellowed
moon and its reflection directly below him—a reflection so perfect in likeness that sometimes it
would take a minute to discern which way was up after a series of spins.

The balmy, summer air felt perfect against his bare arms. Jackets and cloaks were discarded weeks
ago; currently he wore only his sleeveless kaftan over leggings—a wrap-around vest secured tightly
around his waist with a new leather belt. It took quite a bit of convincing on his part to keep Tünde
from using a brighter dye; the Magyar enjoyed vivid colors and strong patterns on their clothing and,
coming from a background of practical Earth tones, Hiccup found it hard to picture himself in
anything that called for so much attention. In the end, she only got away with blue embroidery along
the collar and hem. Hiccup was gifted with a thicker kaftan and new pants as well, but his
upbringing in the north compelled him to wear as little clothing as possible as he experienced the
hottest summer of his life.

The unfamiliar heat of the sun had long evaporated from the thickly forested lands by this time of
night and Hiccup found the temperature much more agreeable. The sweat he accumulated over the
day cooled on his skin, furthering his enjoyment of the ideal flying conditions along with a setting
that cloaked them so well they didn't even have to lower their voices.

The moment of tranquility rippled with Toothless' casual conversation.

::So, did you get your nine shots?::

Hiccup inhaled deeply, allowing his lungs to refresh with the thin, moist ether.

"Yep."

::You can be so ridiculous sometimes...::
Understanding that no offense was meant, Hiccup gave an unseen, easy smile.

"Only sometimes? You know, I'm just trying to make level here."

Toothless snorted. ::Hiccup, we've been over this—::

"Yeah, yeah," Hiccup interjected before Toothless could get into another one of his 'you're not useless' rants. "I still want to be able to defend myself. I can't let you do all the fighting—especially if we're going to face that demon."

Hiccup grimaced almost as soon as the words left his mouth. Once again he accidentally blurted out a topic that Toothless had previously sent clear vibes on as 'uncomfortable'.

Sure enough, Toothless didn't immediately respond. He had fallen so quiet that, if they weren't flying, Hiccup would have thought the dragon asleep.

::Yeah...:: The dragon finally muttered. The chary reservation in that one word gave Hiccup the unusual impression that Toothless was fishing for assurance from him.

Hiccup desperately wanted to press the issue; an issue Toothless had become adept at redirecting anytime it came about. Hiccup's insecurities were brought up and hashed out almost biweekly at this point in their excursion, though that could have a lot to do with him wearing his heart on his sleeve and having so many self-doubts to pick from. He could respect Toothless' preference for privacy; the dragon had a slower method of dealing with his inner demons—one where he would focus on another's problems to forget his own, all the while allowing them to mount within.

Very often, Hiccup felt that Toothless only indulged in his silly impulses and destination desires for a consuming distraction to the decades-long imprisonment. One day it was all going to blow out, and Hiccup could only hope their friendship wouldn't suffer for it.

It was moments like this, where a small opportunity presented itself for expansion, that Hiccup wanted to force Toothless to face the fact that he was taken captive. If only so the dragon could move on.

He knew better. The time wasn't now. Not on such a beautiful night, not when they were both in such good moods.

"I think it's just about time we left," Hiccup decided.

They had lingered in Hungary almost two months now, albeit two very productive months. Hiccup figured that they would learn what they had to of mounted archery and then fly solo from there on. Fights had been breaking out closer and closer to where they camped; more and more of Domokos' people would set out to join the front and then never return. Hiccup liked the Nyék clan, he really did, but he didn't feel comfortable with involving himself in a war he knew very little about. Especially when he wasn't even Hungarian.

::You like it here:: Toothless pointed out, hardly fazed by the seemingly random topic.

"So do you," Hiccup retorted. "I heard you finally got one of the horses to come near you."

Toothless shrugged—or would have had he not had a human on his shoulders. Hiccup could sense the noncommittal reply nonetheless.

::It took a lot of smiling with no teeth to get him to trust me; I fulfilled my goal so I can leave with no regrets. But you enjoy the bed, and the cooked meals. I know you do. You can't lie to me:::
"I enjoy the food and the bed, yes," Hiccup readily admitted. "But I left those before and I can do it again."

He may not have been expressly happy in Berk but he always had comfort. On the road he had been subjected to cold and hunger like he had never been before. However, he found having a best friend along through those times made them ten times more bearable than his best day on Berk. Choosing outlawry, disinheritance and shame (in the eyes of the Vikings) had been the best decision he made—for his own personal interest.

"Is this right? Are we doing the right thing?" he sighed into the night air. The disparaging tone he used contrasted from his earlier light-heartedness, making the questions seem rather sudden to the receiver.

::We are travelers:: Toothless stated in reply. ::No one of the tribe expects us to become family or anything...except, perhaps, that little dark-haired girl that follows you ar—Ow! I need those to fly too, you know!::

Hiccup had yanked on one of Toothless' ear plates, harder than usual, causing the dragon to grumble under his breath as Hiccup said, "I meant leaving Berk and the dragons to their war. As of right now, we know more about the source of the war than anyone else and we're still choosing to ignore it. I mean...do you ever stop and think how...how wrong this is? Or selfish?"

Then again, Toothless didn't have his people directly involved. They were all safe and perched at the edge of the world.

::Neither of us can take that demon in the state we're in and you know that. In fact, sometimes I feel like we should wait until my tailfin grows back:: Toothless proclaimed with a small bit of grump to his statement.

"Would you even need a 'we'?"

If Toothless could fly without aid then Hiccup would be transformed from co-steersman into dead weight on the dragon's back while Toothless fought for his life—and the lives of thousands of other dragons. Archery skills or no.

::I think we would. For one thing, I don't think I'll ever be able to fly straight without your weight on my back::: Hiccup gave the dragon a fond scratch on the head for that, even if it was a white lie. ::For another, I'm too—er, that is—I am...I'm not sure I can trust my mind alone near her...::

Hiccup tried to keep his body reactions under control, not to straighten too fast or accidentally flick the pedal. He wanted to play it cool and not scare Toothless into clamping up again...for he may have just unwittingly confirmed what Hiccup always suspected: that the dragon's pride was hurt so badly by the demon that he refused to face his past. And for a dragon (or a Night Fury, at any rate) pride was an attribute held in the same esteem as courage. Pride and self-confidence—two virtues Toothless liked to have in abundance, and two virtues that took a large blow when he was enslaved.

"We don't have to go back," Hiccup forced himself to say. It if was that painful for Toothless to return, then he would stand by his best friend's side. For as long as it took the dragon to heal.

::No...we don't::: Toothless agreed. He was still being ambiguous about his responses regarding their plan and Hiccup found it frustrating. The more they moved forward, the closer they came to going back, and soon Toothless would be obligated to determine how ready he felt in confronting his captor. ::But I know how important it is to you to stop this war. In fact, we could head back now:::
Hiccup could hear the poorly concealed anxiety in Toothless' words and knew he must have sounded the exact same when he offered to never go back. They kept moving, but they seemed so stuck. No matter their feelings on the history spurring their travels, they always led back to the middle ground: they weren't ready to return; they couldn't let go of the past.

He sighed, unable to enjoy their nightly flight now that his mind was stuck on the demon and their journey and Berk.

"No...we can keep up our selfish unhero routine. I just can't help but feel a little bad about it all...I mean, I know my dad is going to be doing his summer nest hunt, and now I know what's in that nest, but I...I don't know what—"

::Wait...!:: Hiccup could feel Toothless jerk a bit in his glide. ::Your dad actually seeks out the dragons' nest?::

"Well, yeah," Hiccup dismissed, feeling it was an obvious tactic. If someone continually attacks your home, you go to theirs to make them stop.

::How? By water?::

"Sailing, yeah. Why?"

Toothless made his distinctive succession of short growls that Hiccup had come to associate with laughing.

::We noticed ships caught in the rocks before—some that were actually held in the air during the low waters! I assumed those were accidents, not hunters!::

"Why?" Hiccup asked again, stressing the word. He couldn't understand what was so funny about trying to find the source of a village's problems. What were they supposed to do? Just sit back and wait for the dragons to come every month or so?

::They never find anything, do they?:: Toothless asked, and without waiting for a response carried on. ::It's a maze...it's a labyrinth. We only get through it by the pull she sends. A ship certainly wouldn't make it there! Not when navigated by humans::

Hiccup had his mouth open to say something—anything—to defend his father's decisions, but found he had nothing to argue for.

"Then that means..." That meant it was all pointless—the time, the men, the boats—all lost for nothing. Hiccup groaned loudly. "I wish I could tell him not to bother," he whispered.

He felt a chill and knew it had nothing to do with the high altitude. He knew more about the "war" than several generations of Vikings before him, and, to top it off, he was the last person on the Earth that any Berkian would listen to. His father may not have been the most appreciative father, but he still loved Hiccup in his own, extensively-Viking way. Hiccup's miserable existence on Berk happened because he was odd by nature, not because Berk decided to single him out. It wasn't a bad place. He would never condemn Berk to becoming a chained victim unable to retaliate.

::The Magyars...they have those pompous birds, don't they?::

"The what?"

Torn from his thoughts, Hiccup recalled Toothless referring to the Nadder's as 'pompous birds' before, but couldn't understand how they related to the Magyars.
Hiccup brightened in realization. "Messenger hawks!"

"Yes those:: Toothless said impatiently. ::Send one of those, explain the pointlessness of it. He is just wasting resources by doing that...::

Hiccup wanted to maintain his positive enthusiasm, but he had a mind that allowed reality to dampen his spirits far too easily.

"Thanks buddy. But even if they did decide to read the letter and believed it—even after finding out who it's from—do you really expect them to listen to it? Listen to the warning from the guy who abandoned them for dragons?"

"As if they really appreciated you to begin with!:: Toothless scoffed.

"That's not the point!" Hiccup snapped. "What do you expect them to do? Just sit around and wait for the raids to come? To retaliate only while they're attacked? That's not how Vikings work. They...they have to—to—do something to those who slight them. Even if they believed me, they're not going to sit around and do nothing. Not while the seas are open to them. They're stubborn like that..."

::At the very least prepare them...give them the option of ignoring you or not. If they do, then it is not on your head. Ease yourself of this guilt. If they don't, then you have a closer chance of redeeming yourself in their eyes. I mean, it's not like you can get much lower from outlawry::

"Thanks," Hiccup said dryly, despite really meaning it. Before befriending Toothless he always thought of himself as a logical person...but apparently it helped to have a more intelligent friend to keep things in perspective.

He glanced at the moon in the sky, realizing it had begun its descent.

"Let's head in now."

His flight was ruined anyway—he couldn't leave his feelings of self-interest on the ground this time. People were going to die while he and Toothless tried to figure out the demon issue at their own leisurely pace; be it in the raids or in the searches, people would die.

But people would continue to die for much longer if the situation wasn't handled correctly. As they were, neither Hiccup nor Toothless felt they had the power to make a difference: physically in one case, mentally in another. And it if they failed—the only two beings that had any influence over the future of their respective specie—the war would continue for centuries to come until another human-dragon pair learned to communicate.

::You do not owe them anything:: Toothless' declaration cut into Hiccup's introspection. ::They aren't your people anymore and you're only doing this because you have a skewed sense of justice::

"And for you," Hiccup added. He was doing this so Toothless could find his skewed sense of atonement.

::And for me:: Toothless accepted.
"You...you vant me to vat?"

The smile Domokos bestowed upon Hiccup looked more malicious than encouraging in the boy's humble opinion. As if the latest exercises in his training weren't terrifying enough.

In his time with the Magyars, Hiccup developed grounded control over his body, gaining a grace he never thought he would find in his lifetime—only to have it taken away as he slowly learned mounted archery. With his and Toothless' unity in the sky and Hiccup's hard-earned skill with a bow, the young man assumed combining the two would be the simplest part.

He had not anticipated the loss of command on both ends as his plan to leave soon was pushed back day-by-day.

The teamwork he and Toothless shared had been something to be proud of, and having it slip from his grasp time and time again aggravated Hiccup to no end—especially after everything they had been through to build their remarkable solidarity. Toothless, apparently, shared these sentiments, because the dragon had gotten ticked at Hiccup on more than one occasion for a delayed fin adjustment. Something had changed to cause the loss of coordination: either his own divided awareness or his increased attention to Toothless' role became that much of a distraction. Hiccup now had to consider his surroundings, his target, more thoroughly, rather than simply sense the movements of the dragon's body.

That's not to say he was a total lost cause. Like with anything he set his mind to, Hiccup steadily began to get the hang of the art. When he wasn't practicing—pitching in along the riverbanks and firing at obvious targets in the heart of the sweep—he observed other Magyars on horseback. He took in what he could from where he could, applying it to his own situation, and, little by little, he was able to maneuver his foot and arms at separate intervals and flip his hit-to-miss ratio to his favor.

Hiccup figured all he needed was to practice constantly, with or without the supervision of the Nyék.

At least, he did until Domokos declared he needed to maintain the same accuracy at night as he had in broad daylight.

With the most horrifying learning method Hiccup had ever heard of.

And that included Gobber's 'learning on the job' approach.

To make matters worse, Domokos bore that smile all throughout his explanation. The one that said he was laughing at Hiccup's disconcertment.

"You cannot be serious."

"But he is Náttfari," the older man emphasized. "His element is sse night. You aim to match him in accuracy, and ssen you must match him in element too."

"Domokos..." Hiccup groaned.

"It vill be fine! You have sse veaker sight—training like ssis vill only improve your teamvork, and make up for sse control you lose in adding bowvork."

"But—but zis? Really?"

Domokos remained unabashed in the face of his student's trepidation. "If you practice in sse day time
"It will be safer for sse bod of you."

Hiccup goggled. "Safer? You vant me to—stop laughing!"

"I am sorry, my friend, but your reaction is funny." Domokos made a poor effort to sober. "I am not doing ssis to harass you, I promise you ssis. You can communicate viss Tannlaus, can you not? Ssis should help you greatly in regaining sse control you lose when adding weaponry to your flight."

Hiccup stared blankly at the long strip of cloth held out for him to take. A blindfold.

::I think you are forgetting my permission...and I am not okay with this::

Hiccup glanced at the dragon that had just slunk from the horse barn. Toothless regarded the offered blindfold with the same misgivings Hiccup had.

"Toothless refyooses," Hiccup quickly recited, much in the same tone a sibling would use to tattle. Let the dragon appear to be the difficult one.

Though not as cocky as he was a moment ago (coercing Toothless to do something was a task no one aside from Hiccup would try), Domokos would not be deterred.

"Trust me Hiccup—you vant to practice in sse daylight."

Hiccup knew Domokos was right—a blindfold could be removed quickly if he needed to see what he was doing. Shooting at night would probably get some innocent bystander killed. Or himself.

"You can understand each osser; ssis will be much easier for both of you viss ssis ability," the man added, seeing a slight change in Hiccup's features.

"Stop being so right all the time," Hiccup grumbled in Norse.

"It comes vith age," Domokos responded smoothly.

Hiccup started. "I—vait—"

Domokos couldn't actually understand Norse...right?

A horn sounded in the distance; three, deep, long blows shook the atmosphere, successfully dissipating all sentiments of teasing and hesitance.

Horses whinnied in the background, Nyék men shouted, rushing from the trees to the barn at every angle, grabbing their weapons.

"They have found us," Domokos murmured. His mouth was set in a hard line, the jovial face now resembling that of the one that first greeted Hiccup. Domokos' dark, hawk-like eyes locked on green.

"Come. You must ride Tannlaus to your possessions, gasser ssem, and ssen meet me on sse shore."

Hiccup leaned back, bewildered.

"I—"

"You do not vant to fight ssis var, Hiccup. It is not yours and you do not have sse heart for killing wissout true reason. I would never involve you in it."

The dismissal was abrupt, and despite Hiccup's feelings on lingering in one place for too long he did not want their parting to be on a war's terms.
"But—"

Domokos laid a tanned, rough hand on Hiccup's shoulder and squeezed. It felt both affectionate and commanding and Hiccup knew he was to obey his aged instructor.

"Go. I vill meet you at sse shore for a proper farevell."

Giving a slow nod, Hiccup finally conceded. It looked like his time with the Magyars had come to an end.

Chapter End Notes

I apologize for the super boring chapter :|
Departed

Chapter Summary

Hiccup departs from the Magyars

Departed

Hiccup waited for Domokos to reach the shore, his chest tight. The distant sound of masculine shouts and even fainter clangs of butting weapons colored the background, adding to the tension coursing through his body. He had to wonder at the speed of a Night Fury—something he thought entirely natural—compared to that of a horse given that he had been to the island and back already. Many women, as well as the youngest of the clan, hidden in the bunker witnessed his hasty packing. He had given them a broken message explaining his departure involving rushed English and a few Hungarian words he picked up. They understood; some bowed to him in eastern custom, some shook his hand in western, a few gave him short hugs and back pats. Neither Katul nor Tünde were present, which led Hiccup to believe they were on the mainland either fetching their horses or opting to hide in another camp.

Katul would never get her chance to ride Toothless. Not in this visit, anyway. Hiccup entertained the thought of returning someday to help him deal with the reality of not saying good-bye to everyone.

"Hiksti!" The shout was accompanied by the rapid clomps of a gallop. Domokos vaulted from the saddle before the horse even came to a full stop. In any other circumstance Hiccup would have laughed at the similar maneuver he often pulled himself. The Magyar's steed, Haláp, pawed at the ground in nervous agitation, shinnying sideways from Toothless out of instinct but otherwise remaining loyally by its master's side.

"Domokos," Hiccup gasped. Just knowing that a battle thrashed against the outskirts of their camp left him breathless.

Without another word Hiccup thrust the horn at the man—the horn that started this all. Domokos didn't take it right away, instead staring at its sudden appearance as though it were a hallucination expected to disappear at a moment's notice.

"A promise is a promise." Hiccup smiled despite everything. His voice seemed to prod Domokos from his trance and the man gingerly took the horn.

Rough hands ran along the smoothed icons, worshipful and caring. Domokos took a breath; somehow sounding rejuvenated, and tied the leather strap of the horn to a loop on his belt.

"Give me your map," Domokos ordered. Hiccup hopped to the task without delay and soon had the worn parchment unrolled at his feet. Domokos bent to observe it, bringing a finger to an area on the map Hiccup had circled several times.

"You plan to go to ssis Mikh—lag—ghard, yes?" At Hiccup's affirmative nod he moved his finger to a point on a blue line Hiccup knew represented the Duna.

"Follow the Duna south to sse river, Morva," the finger transferred to a different blue line, "follow it
until sse stara planina...sse Old Mountain. Ssere is a small river ssat cuts between ssem,“ he tapped at the thin, blue crease splitting the white line illustrating mountains, "vhen you reach it follow it souss to sse Maritsa river...it flows eastvard...follow it until it splits and ssen continue eastward along land. You should reach sse valls of Mikhlaghard. Keep sse water in sight.”

Domokos stood, a silent indication that he delivered all the instruction necessary, and Hiccup rolled up the map as fast as he had laid it. He felt immensely grateful Domokos had the forethought to actually show him on the map rather than only speak it. Visual stimulation he could recall, but verbal often went in one ear and out the other.

"Tank you,” he said sincerely as he packed the map securely in his rucksack. "So I assyoome I vill be practicing night archery on my own?”

Domokos smiled as though the war were the farthest thing from his mind at the moment. "You can do it," he assured Hiccup. "You have covered remarkable ground in your time viss us. As long as you are driven, I have faith you vill continue to flourish. You vill have to set your own pace. But it is good fortune ssat you have someone to help you stay sse course.”

He nodded to Toothless, who seemed pleased at being addressed with such warm and familiar tones. Hiccup knew the dragon liked anyone who trusted him, though he didn't think Toothless' opinion on blindfolded flying changed since he last expressed it.

Hiccup held out a hand. "Vell, zis is it.”


Hiccup returned the gesture, released the arm and leapt onto the saddle with agility. His feet were in the stirrups and his harness clipped within two blinks.

"Oh, Hiksti!”

Hiccup glanced up in time to catch the weapon thrown at his face. Domokos laughed at the boy's panicked fumbling to avoid dropping the bow.

"It is a practice bow," Domokos explained at Hiccup's bewildered expression. "You vill need to find a better one eventually—one ssat is compatible viss you—but it vill do for now. Here," Hiccup had more success catching a few arrows bundled together, now that he had his attention on Domokos. "Ssat should last you for a litte vhile. I trust you know how to craft your own arrows by now?”

Hiccup blinked out of his dumbfounded state. "Oh—eh—yes!”

The Nyék clan taught him much about their methods, from the base of their bows to the best feathers to use for arrow fletching. Even some of their battle tactics were shared.

A particularly loud cry broke from the hum of battle that had somehow turned to background noise during his interactions with Domokos. Hiccup bit his lip.

"You vill be okay?” he asked. He needed to be sure. If they truly needed his help he would stay. They were far too kind to him not to.
Domokos waved off his worry.

"Go. Ssis is not your var and I vould not vant you to be dragged into it. One not of Magyar decent has no place ssere."

Hiccup slipped the bow over his torso so that the string pressed diagonally across his chest and the grip to his back. He would have to unstring it when he found a safer place to land.

Hiccup took a quick mental inventory, recounting his valuables minus the horn. Toothless was saddled with quite a few more possessions than when they arrived—most of which were thrown at him by Katul and her mother: clothing, food, even some remedial herbs... though ones like dried opium poppy he had no idea what to use for.

Satisfied, he gave his teacher a final smile.

"Domokos... köszönöm. For eferyzing."

The older man held a hand to his heart and gave a slight bow.

"It vas my pleasure. I feel ssat having any impact on a life such as yours vill only enrich my own."

Hiccup paused halfway in his take-off crouch, amused by the statement. Domokos spoke before Hiccup could make a smaralec comment regarding his own importance.

"I am a...diviner, as you say...for my people—the signs spoke of it at my birss many, many cold seasons ago." The suddenness of the statement, what it implied, chased the mirth from Hiccup's face. Seeing the bug-eyed expression, Domokos had the gall to grin as he said, "I know you have been touched by sse Gods, Hiksti Hlýri, by whatever form ssey have chosen. I am not so generous to everyone, you know."

Hiccup made a very conscious effort not to fall off his dragon, going so far as to grip the front of the saddle. He felt as though he had been physically struck; the air left his lungs and a momentary numbness befell him as his brain tried to make sense of what Domokos's words.

A diviner. Domokos had the powers of an Elder, a gifted Elder, and he had known more about Hiccup than he let on.

But more than Domokos' status (which Hiccup should have figured considering the man's seeming omniscience) and more than implying his own celestial contact (which Hiccup still had trouble believing in), one thing stood out above all.

"I am not a—" he paused, swallowing. "How did you know I vas a Haddock?"

Instead of verbally replying, Domokos smiled—that infuriating smile—and mounted Haláp. The horse snorted at his rider's sudden weight, but otherwise did nothing but turn his dark eye onto the strange human-dragon duo. For some inane reason, Hiccup suddenly noticed several similarities between Domokos and Haláp he hadn't before: their eye color, their hair color...even the skin and hide of man and beast seemed to match. Like they were destined to match.

"Ve vill see each osser again, my friend," Domokos stated and Hiccup found himself knowing this to be true, even without the new awareness of the Magyar's seer-like abilities.

Hiccup also knew he wouldn't get a straight answer out of the man, not if he were anything like Gudrid. Not today, anyway. One day he would force a clear truth from him, without the riddles and innuendos. One day, hopefully, he would understand his own destiny as much as individuals like...
Gudrid and Domokos seemed to.

Hiccup sighed, and with a shake of his head and a rueful smile, accepted this upended departure.

::Ready?:: Toothless asked. The dragon could feel Hiccup's weight shift in anticipation of takeoff.

Hiccup responded with a hand rested on his neck and they launched into the sky, taking off at a speed no Magyar could hope to match on horseback.

Hiccup didn't look back, but he knew Domokos would watch him until distance made him indiscernible.

########

::Are you okay?::

Toothless had to ask; Hiccup had been far too quiet for the amount of unrest radiating off him.

"Wha—ah, yeah! Yeah, I'm fine. I mean...I'm a little freaked out by how much Domokos knows about...well, everything. Not that I know exactly what he knows, but I know he knows more in an otherworldly sense. I swear, he and Gudrid have been having secret dream meetings behind my back or something..."

::You know...all we have to do is deviate a little to the left and we'll be close enough—::

"No, no," Hiccup cut him off. "I shouldn't get involved—Domokos didn't want me to anyway."

::You're curious:: Toothless continued to push. ::And you feel bad. I can hear it in your heartbeat::

Hiccup chose to ignore the heartbeat comment; Toothless had perception to envy.

"I'm not a Magyar. I don't know enough about any of this to butt in. I really have no business..."

They were already banking towards the gaggle of war cries; Hiccup hadn't even noticed his foot switch positions until the increase in volume caught his attention.

He just wanted to see! To make sure the Nyék would be okay. To make sure they weren't outnumbered or desperately in need of the help of an inexperienced archer flying around on a dragon.

That was how he tried to justify his direct disobedience of Domokos, anyway.

The first thing Hiccup noticed, even before the gore or broken bodies, was a mass of color. Apparently, Hungarians in general wanted to be seen and it wasn't just the Nyéks who brightly dyed their clothing.

Hiccup recognized some of them, which helped to identify who their enemies were by process of elimination. Many fought on foot using their sabers, some fired from their steeds, others managed a combination of sword fighting while mounted.

Toothless slowed their speed, giving Hiccup more time to observe the calamity. It only served to enhance the need to help in some way.
"We might as well contribute where we can," Hiccup offered haltingly. Now that he'd seen it, he couldn't turn away. Not without doing something. He'd feel like he was running away—like he ran away from the last war.

Toothless felt as dubious as Hiccup sounded. He knew they agreed it would be best not to get too close to another culture's problems, but somehow Hiccup's resolve to carry on their way waned the closer they got to truly leaving.

::I thought you did not want to involve yourself in their war?:: Not that he could really complain; he was always game for a good fight.

"I don't, but—there's Solt!"

Hiccup didn't know how or why his eye was drawn to the young man, but the Magyar managed to stand out among the action. Solt, on foot, battled with his saber, dominating his opponent just as effectively as he defeated Hiccup in every spar.

::Hey—!:.

"I see it," Hiccup growled. A man not of the clan had just finished off a member of the Nyék, a member Hiccup recalled sharing meals with, and now furtively crept towards Solt's back with a poised sword as the other engaged in combat.

Hiccup's foot tweaked the fin and they pitched sideways into a drop. The bow was slipped off his shoulder and one of his satchelled arrows found its way into the nock. Hiccup could only focus on the soon-to-be backstabber and how dishonorable it was and how, despite Solt being an ass to him, he didn't deserve such a cheap death.

With indignation tunneling his vision, Hiccup's thumb released at just the right moment in their swoop and the arrow plunged into its target.

Not only did the arrow strike the man in the shoulder, but also the force at which it hit—the combined power of bow tension and a speeding dragon—physically lifted the man and threw him backwards. Hiccup had no doubt in his mind that it pierced straight through the chainmail (if even worn)...something he otherwise would have been unable to do on foot.

::Yes!:: Toothless cheered. This mounted archery business had taken a turn for the better in his opinion.

"Wow..." Hiccup breathed. "I—I did it!"

And it wasn't a tree. It was a person.

He turned in his seat as they rose, wanting to get a reassuring intake that it had actually happened. He had done that. He had taken someone down so hard that they were thrown. Never in his life did he think he were capable—

"Oi! Ssank you, Hikstl!"

Absolute shock dazed Hiccup for the second time within a minute as the grateful voice belonged to none-other than Solt, who may not have seen what happened, but certainly put the pieces together fast enough.

Not one for ignoring gratitude, Hiccup managed to compose himself in time to salute the young man back before Solt was absorbed in new opponent.
"My turn now? Is it my turn?"

"Your turn—what?"

Hiccup looked down at Toothless, who had his split tongue hanging from the side of his mouth like an excited dog.

"Come on...lets show them what a dragon can do! Enough of these flying sticks!"

It was the fact that Toothless sounded so wound up at the prospect of shooting fire-bolts at people that had Hiccup almost instantly agreeing.

"It has been a long time since you've gotten to shoot fire at anyone," Hiccup murmured by way of consent.

They were already heading towards the source of the battle—to where the waves of enemies emerged. The line of attackers soon became visible; Hiccup could see a clear gap between the Nyék and the enemy.

"Alright," he whispered against the wind as he and Toothless transformed into a missile of firepower and intelligence, descending from the sky like a harbinger of death. Toothless did the honors of announcing their presence with a roar, a tactic to instill fear in the offense. The result was instantaneous; all eyes were on them. Horses of the Nyék's enemy were already rearing back in alarm at the dark and dangerous mass, the men atop screaming and pointing their weapons—but no one fired, uncertainty and fear staying their weapons for that single instant Hiccup and Toothless needed to get close enough.

Toothless opened his jaws, the glow within the maw their only warning before three bolts struck the ground in front of the advancing crew. Men were thrown from their mounts, the screaming intensified, and several turned tail and ran at the growing flames catching onto the foliage. With much of their path blocked by a blaze, many of those still in control were forced to stop.

The next step took some fancy footwork on Hiccup's part as the primed arrows were finally released. They boys spun and weaved, rising quickly to diminish their risk and returning back on track. Nothing struck, of course; Hiccup could have sworn Toothless responded to his silent commands better and vise versa. Proficiency most likely related to the lack of archery going on at his end.

Hiccup's guilt in leaving at such a time released from his chest. He had done his part, even though Domokos had asked him not to. At least now the Nyék's enemies would be less inclined to continue to advance. If they weren't terrified enough, the possibility that there were more dragons ahead would surely make them think twice before attacking again.

"I feel good," he announced to his partner. The Duna reappeared, their course set before them, and the summer winds felt fantastic. The shouts of battle were mostly transformed to terror born from their efforts—which Hiccup didn't mind listening too at all. It's not like anyone really got hurt.

Except for that one guy.

But he had it coming, trying to sneak up from behind. Speaking of which...

"Did you see? Solt seemed happy to see me," Hiccup stated brightly. "I mean, yeah, it was the end and everything, but at least I got him to smile at me once...and not in a mean way!"

"He was probably happy that you were leaving."
"He thanked me!" Hiccup sniffed.

::Yeah, thanked you for leaving his sister's virtue in tact—::

Hiccup reared back, cringing.

"W-what? That wasn't—I didn't even—! You always do this! You don't even know what that means!"

::That's important to humans, is it not?:: Toothless inquired innocently enough. ::It seems there is a lot of importance placed on untouched women::

Getting his spluttering under control, Hiccup tried to make himself respond seriously. Toothless was naturally curious about these things...he didn't know how sobering and awkward they were for Hiccup to talk about. It wasn't like living in the wilderness was giving him any comprehension on the fairer sex.

"Humans tend to choose one...uh, mate, for their life, so they like them in a pure state. Oh! Well, that sounded bad, but they prefer wives who have never been t-touched before..."

Was he really trying to explain human courtship to his best friend...who wasn't even a human?

Toothless snorted.

::That is just ridiculous to me. If she can breed well enough then it shouldn't matter who's had her before::

Hiccup dropped his face into his hands. How did this always happen? Just moments ago he was shooting Hungarians with arrows, feeling confident and manly, and now...and now...

"Humans aren't dragons, okay? They like one partner in their life and they want them in...a good...condition." What was he saying? It sounded terrible! "They're—we—it's a cultural thing!"

::It's an impractical culture:: Toothless intoned, impervious to Hiccup's embarrassment. ::Won't you do the same thing one day? Choose one female::

"I'm...I'm not inclined to," Hiccup answered honestly. Though that had more to do with the connotation that marriage would mean less mobility and freedom—two things that he could honestly say were his and he had no intention of giving them up anytime soon.

Besides, people married for monetary purposes, to create alliances, and he was content with proving he could manage both on his own. With Toothless' help, that is. He didn't need to join a family for a stable life, and he certainly wouldn't tie himself to a woman to grant her one.

Marriage was also to keep up socially acceptable appearances. He already blew that to Hel.

::Good, because I am not carrying your female. I don't care how 'pure' she is::

Hiccup couldn't take it any more.

"Okay, this conversation needs to stop now."

::Is embarrassment regarding mating habits another cultural thing::

Why couldn't Toothless just let him have his manly moment?
"That is not stopping!"

::By Tiamat's udder!::

"Hey, that time we avoided all the rocks!"

The contrast in tones proved just how far each male's mindset lay. Toothless was ready to ground himself for the rest of the day; Hiccup found optimism in each near miss.

::We need to stop now:: Toothless demanded. He couldn't take much more of this. ::I want food::

"Just one more time!" his rider pleaded. It was easy for him to feel excited—he was blindfolded. He didn't have to witness each terrifying close call.

::No:: the dragon deadpan.

"Ugh. Fine..."

They landed at their campsite on the shores of the Morva. It was a short trip, being so close to the ground to begin with. Hiccup flew off the saddle with a bounce in his step, ripping the tied cloth from his head.

Toothless was decidedly less bouncy as he collapsed on the ground... and in no way helpful with the removal of his saddle. He didn't know where Hiccup got all this enthusiasm, though he recalled seeing it often when the boy was trying to figure out how to get him back in the air. No amount of failure would deter him.

Only this time it wasn't a mechanical problem that needed to be fixed; they simply needed to practice. Which required Toothless to participate more in the painful game of trial in error as well.

"I thought you were hungry?" Hiccup asked the lazing dragon. He had finally managed to get the blasted saddle from the unhelpful reptile.

::Can you get it?:: Toothless groaned, rolling to his side. ::I'm more tired than hungry::

Hiccup pursed his lips, but allowed the dragon the request.

"Okay. But you better be prepared to do twice as much practice as today since we're quitting early. We've almost got this."

::Nooooo...:: It came out as a pained moan. It stirred no sympathy from the rogue Viking.

"Yes," Hiccup finalized in the same short tone Toothless used on him earlier. He turned and armed himself with a dagger, his already strung bow was strapped around his bare chest a couple arrows were tucked into his belt. The bow and arrow were really just a reserve option; he used his arrows sparingly, focusing his attentions on blindfolded-flying rather than extending his arrow supply. Over the last month he slowly collected reeds, decent sized rocks and saved the occasional bone from their game with the intention of forging some ammo, but he had not the tools to pull it off. A problem he refused to worry about at the moment, especially with the improvement of his and Toothless' performance.
Toothless watched as the human collected his weapons, content to lie boneless in the grass. The boy was often without a shirt as they endured the sweltering heat of Tvímánuður—as Hiccup called it (though he admitted his uncertainty if that was the exact month). It wasn't the greatest idea when one planned on crashing, but Hiccup claimed he couldn't stand the magnitude of the temperature they experienced and would not bear unnecessary layers. Toothless had to agree; he was starting to shed scales prematurely.

Unfortunately, that left the stretched figure of corded muscle and bone littered with scrapes and bruises that took forever to heal in the dragon's opinion. The lingering of each blemish annoyed Toothless to no end, taunting him for his inability to protect his only charge. Toothless' part of their new training regimen involved being the 'eyes' of the pair and communicating their surroundings, as it would play out in the night when Hiccup needed to focus on a target. Hiccup's part was to listen, react accordingly, and trust Toothless to relay accurate information. Hiccup had no problem with trusting (though some problem with the listening) and each crash or mishap had Toothless feeling partially responsible.

Hiccup never complained much, but Toothless knew he couldn't be comfortable in such a raw state. One time Hiccup hurt his arm so badly in a crash that they were forced to 'take it easy' for over a week. Hiccup insisted it wasn't broken and Toothless, with little to no knowledge on human health, had no choice but to take his word for it.

A new and unexpected presence startled him from his rest.

::Hiccup?::

It was stupid for him to call out to Hiccup; the boy had left at some point while he dozed. And this wasn't Hiccup's scent. This wasn't Hiccup's weight moving along the ground. Hiccup did not have a drooling set of tail-long saber fangs.

Though Toothless would forever maintain that Hiccup's teeth scared him far more than the ones bared at him now.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Hiccup and Toothless encounter another dragon. And we check in on Berk.

Chapter Notes

This first scene will kind of be exclusively from Toothless’ P.O.V. so we can hear some dragon-dragon speak (unlike the sea serpent scene). Please don’t be confused!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Classified

Toothless slowly, almost flippantly, rolled to his feet, keeping his lime-green eyes on the intruder.

In all likelihood, the title of 'intruder' fell on he and Hiccup; there was a very good chance they had trespassed on the territory of the dragon now tensely approaching him. It slunk low to the ground, moving in a slow crawl used to stalk prey. Toothless kept his guard up as well, but otherwise watched impassively as the dragon came to him.

The dragon across from him was almost absent of color, a stark contrast to his own sable scales. The long fangs protruding from either side of the top lip bore indelible streaks of yellow and orange from centuries of hunting. Spikes fanned around its head, nearly in similar length to its fangs, and flowed in two sets down its spine. Its body had to have been at least as big as his own from nose to tail...probably bigger, if he were to be honest with himself.

Okay. Most definitely bigger.

But not by much.

Toothless filed away more and more details as it pressed in its advance. Though physically larger than him, the wingspan appeared shorter than his own, and given the number of protrusions on its body, it was guaranteed to be slower than him. The neck was longer, but only just. Its claws extended farther than his as well, better for digging into ground and pushing off—so more agility on the ground than he was naturally gifted with. Physicalities such as these usually gave a challenger an advantage in a grounded fight, but its limbs were leaner and Toothless could see that it had less muscle tone in its forelegs. It did not look to have been in many recent fights judging by the lack of blemishes on its body.

It probably ate all its competition years ago.

Toothless just realized the color of its eyes—a pale gold—when the scent hit him.

This was a female.
His ear fins tucked back as he finally took on a more actively defensive posture. Territorial males were one thing, but if she had eggs somewhere in the area then he and Hiccup could be in serious trouble. Protective females were more dangerous than any creature he had ever encountered.

::That's enough!:: He barked by way of command, and surprisingly, she stopped. She still stayed low, belly to the ground and spike-laden tail swinging side to side in agitation.

::Who are you?:: her voice was guttural, older sounding than he would have guessed, and it spurred him into scrutinizing her scales further. They were not white of age, but he would not be surprised if they soon lost their prime sheen.

::TataqiqKivgaq:: he clipped, wanting to get down to business. ::Is this your land?::

And had she run into Hiccup yet? She didn't smell of him and there were no bloodstains, so Toothless could only assume the human was safe for now. His gut instinct told him much the same.

The dragoness didn't answer at first, now sniffing at him. A paw rose as though she planned on taking a step further.

Toothless released a warning snarl and she shrunk back. He was starting to suspect that she was not with eggs or hatchlings going by her relatively calm behavior at his presence.

::A human in a dragon's skin?: she prompted curiously, continuing to scent what she could from him.

::Was your eggshell made of cotton?:: Toothless growled. ::I am a dragon!::

The dragoness huffed and snarled; the impudence of such an intruder deserved her enmity first.

::You smell of human!:: she snapped. ::And one of your kind is never seen in the light!::

::And you smell of ignorance:: he rejoined, not bothering to acknowledge her familiarity with his kind. ::What do you want?::

Her eyes slit further, a harsh noise emanating from her throat. :Do not dare provoke me on my own land, flippant hatchling. Be thankful I have not yet ripped the undersized scales from your hide::

::Are you challenging me?:: Toothless barked back in a short laughed ::You clearly have no survival instinct to do such a thing::

::It is you who lacks instinct if you think a cripple stands a chance against me::

So she had noticed.

Toothless' lip curled, revealing his smaller, but no less deadly teeth.

::I don't need flight to end a lesser dragon such as you::

Her back arched to create a dome of barbs and long claws curled into the ground, ready to spring, as she gnashed, ::You need a lesson in humility::

Toothless prepared himself too, knowing he'd have to use his agility and sleek build to avoid those spikes at every offensive maneuver she performed.

Before either could make a move a new presence joined them, preceded by the noise of a smaller body moving through brush and the distinct scent of man.
"Toothless? What're you—"

Much like any beast in such a situation, the dragoness switched angles and went for the human.

Toothless barreled into her side a second later, catching her midair and slamming her into the ground with all the power in his body. He sprung back right after as her tail lashed up at him. Hiccup's cry of "Whoa!" hardly reached his ears. He was just content with keeping her attention away from the boy.

Righting at once, the dragoness charged him. She kept her head low so that her victim would get the brunt of her spiked crown; a tactic that would have worked for a slower target, but only served to take her eyes off of him.

Toothless vaulted over her, just narrowly missing her maneuver of jerking her head up with impaling intents. He spun in the dirt upon landing and head butted her smooth side. One of the advantages to having a shorter, stockier neck was the ability to power cranial attacks with less risk to the body.

She lost footing for a moment, perhaps feeling so much resentment at being bested twice by the other dragon that she did not hear Hiccup's cheering in Toothless' favor.

The dragoness pounced a third time and Toothless reared up on his hind legs to bash her head to the side with his forepaw, knocking her well off course and causing her body to slam into the ground hard enough to raise dust.

She was left slithering a couple paces back to shake her head clear and Toothless simply had to take that moment to revel at his strength. He knew he was strong, any dragon with an ounce of pride would never say differently of itself, but he hadn't realized how much more powerfully enabled carrying Hiccup had made him. Though unused to fighting in such a manner, his shoulder and wing muscles had bulked to the point of empowering nearly crippling blows—something most of his kind weren't built for. Not in a ground fight.

He purred.

The dragoness recovered quickly enough for having her brains rattled and, more incensed than ever, reared up to match his two-legged stance, claws extended to their fullest. For a suspended moment the two dragons swiped at each other. Toothless may have had the more powerful legs but she had the stronger claws and his scales were quickly littered with tears.

In a split decision, Toothless dropped and launched forward, biting at her briefly exposed underbelly. He managed to nip at the skin, perhaps breaking it, but in the next moment she flew backwards like a cat bared to water.

Hiccup stuck close to a tree, standing partially behind it in a weak act of shielding himself.

"What's going on?" he asked, feeling safe enough to keep the whole left half of his body open.

Suddenly reminded of the human present, the thing that originally set her off, the dragoness made another dash towards him.

Toothless leapt between her and Hiccup, just making it in time and swiping at her head. She jumped back, succeeding in avoiding another painful blow. Her eyes lingered on Toothless' mighty forelegs and realized, perhaps, that he was physically stronger than her despite his smaller size and youth.

His kind was revered for their mystery, even among the dragon populace, and it was possible she had misjudged his capability.
Still, she could not condone behavior such as this. Especially not his interference in her dealing with the scale-less creature behind him.

::Human!: the dragoness screeched, her chest heaved and her nostrils flared. ::Of the same scent! You protect it?::

Toothless snorted at the dramatics and ignored his stinging legs.

::Yes, I protect him. It's a male:: he blandly informed the stranger before tossing over his shoulder, ::We have a visitor, as you can see. I will take care of this. You stay behind the tree::

Hiccup's only response was to repeat under his breath, "It's a male...tch..."

The dragoness appeared torn between killing the annoying, young intruder and his human and indulging her curiosity over such companionship.

::This is your human?::

::Yes::

::I had not realized they could be kept as companions:: she stated. She sounded as though she was making conversation but the aggression in her body language did not lessen. Her pride was wounded in their short tussle and she would not soon forget it.

::It's not easy::: Toothless conceded to her comment.

"I think I know this one," Hiccup suddenly said from behind him. "I saw it in the dragon manual..."

Toothless was both annoyed that Hiccup refused to remain unobtrusive and grateful to at least have him out of the female's reach.

::He speaks the language of Norse!: The dragoness sounded truly surprised at this. ::It is very rare around here. He is far from his birthplace, is he not?::

::Yes, I took him away from it::: Toothless said absentlly. He took a moment to glance behind him.
Hiccup had stepped further away from the tree, observing the dragoness through half-lidded eyes. The fool put more focus into thinking than safety.

"The name isn't really coming to me," Hiccup said aloud. "I want to say Sabre-Tooth Driver dragon…but something's off..."

::Is he referring to me?:: the dragoness hissed, affronted and no longer allowing curiosity to stay her hostility. ::I am an Acutacustos you foolish human!::

And then, as though for Toothless' own amusement, Hiccup punched a fist into his palm, looking inordinately pleased with himself, and declared, "Oh! It's a White Dragon!"

::Insolence!:: The dragoness screamed, looking ready to plow through Toothless to get to the boy. Toothless spread his wings out, showing off their impressive span, and let out a long hiss, letting her know she was not to attempt such a thing.

::He can't hear you. He's a human:: he said in Hiccup's defense.

"Am I pissing it off?" Hiccup asked with a slight wince. He stepped back behind the tree.

::Yes:: two dragons replied back, though only one was conveyed. Toothless added, ::And she refers to herself as an Acutacustos::

He gave the self-declared Acutacustos a look as though to say "are you happy?" She did, in fact, look happier.

"Oh. Sorry," Hiccup apologized to the dragoness. He looked to Toothless, "Is she here to attack us?"

::So she claims::

::This is my territory:: She drew herself up to her full height, puffing out her chest regally. ::I reserve the right to kill trespassers::

::I didn't sense any markings:: Toothless argued. ::Nor does your scent permeate the area. You know...I don't think we are on your land::

He landed an accusing eye on her bleached hide. To her credit she did not look abashed.

::I had not gotten around to this area yet, but in due time—::

"I can't really remember anything I read about these. I think the dragon manual said that it—uh, she—likes silk." Both dragons stopped their bickering and turned their eyes to the human partially muttering from the tree. Hiccup had his hand to his chin, with minimal attention on the current situation as he racked his brain for some long forgotten information. "So you could lure her with...no wait...blowing air into her eyes will poison—no—no poisons...no that's the wrong one too...what was it that the manual said?"

Toothless fought the urge to turn his back to the female so he could wallop Hiccup into silence. He was not helping anything.

::Well the human manual said banishment results in a diminished survival instinct:: he retorted sharply, willing the boy to just stop drawing attention to himself.

Hiccup's jaw dropped and unthinkingly shouted, "There's a human manual?"

Toothless ended up taking his eye off the female after all. Just so he could knock his head against the
ground.

::No! You gullible idiot. But if there was it wouldn't be very flattering!:;

Hiccup rubbed the back of his neck, looking, and most likely feeling, rather foolish. He stepped fully behind the tree and out of sight, much to Toothless' satisfaction.

"Ha ha...yeah...I knew that," Hiccup's disembodied voice rang falsely.

::I really cannot believe you said that::: Toothless deadpanned. He glanced at the female, who had her head cocked in interest. She had probably never encountered a dragon-manual before. They were more popular in the North and had only been around for a couple hundred Roving spells as far as he knew.

"Hey!" Hiccup sounded chagrined. "If we have one of you then it's possible there's one of us."

::We can't write! And yours isn't even accurate!:::

"Well neither is yours!" There was a long pause in which Toothless imagined Hiccup slapping his forehead several times. The boy eventually added, "If it existed."

::Don't speculate about my nonexistent manual!:::

"I don't have to. It's inaccurate. If it existed, that is."

::But it doesn't, so it is accurate:::

This made no sense.

"But if it did, you could amend it to include all the awesome things you learned about me as a human to make it more accurate."

Toothless had no idea how things spiraled into this.

::You...that's just...:::

"Too easy?"

::Yes. I don't even know where to start:::

"Sorry about that. I'm not really on my game today."

::It's fine. You were in the sun longer than usual:::

"I know you like a challenge."

::We'll try again tomorrow:::

::Excuse me::: the dragoness huffed. ::It is one thing to encroach on my territory but do not ignore me for a game of insipid human dialect:::

Toothless snapped his teeth at her. ::If you really insist on dying today, by all means, keep irritating me. I can easily dine on your tart flesh this night:::

A strangled noise emerged from the tree and Toothless mentally rolled his eyes. A gesture he hardly ever did before he surrounded himself with two-leggers.
::Or we can just call a temporary non-aggression pact and agree to ignore each other for the time being::, he amended.

The dragoness looked at him as though he had sprouted fur.

::Are you too coward to kill me? Or simply afraid of death?:

Toothless offered her a flat stare for the suggestion.

::It's not that::: he assured her. ::My companion considers violence of any kind needless and would never forgive me if I killed you for such a trivial reason:::

::Trivial?? The dragoness turned wide, amber eyes to the tree smelling of human. ::Pride and ownership are no such trivial matters! Most would argue that death over a lush land is pride!:::

Toothless nodded sympathetically, for the first time feeling in agreement with the dragoness.

::I try and I try to explain it to him, but it must be a human concept. From what I gather humans would be much more willing to die over a female's purity:::

::That is simply...nonsensical:::

::I know!::

"I suddenly feel like I need to defend my race," Hiccup announced loudly.

::I'd say more than just your race needs defending::: Toothless quipped over his shoulder.

"Ass..."

::You are the strangest dragon I have ever met::: the dragoness claimed with no indication on whether it was a compliment or insult. Her demeanor had subdued much since their fight and she now regarded him with a different look. An unplacable look. ::You speak as a human:::

Toothless flared his nostrils.

::I do not!:: Fearing he could not accurately assess his own speech pattern he deferred to Hiccup.

::Do I speak like a human??

"Sound human to me," Hiccup said reading as entirely impassive.

::What the Hel do you know!::

"What the Hel do you know! You don't have to listen to you, I do!"

::That doesn't even make sense!:::

::I will allow you and the human to spend one night on these lands untouched, and expect you to be gone by morning::: the dragoness announced, ceasing what was sure to be another inane conversation between dragon and human. She stared at the black dragon for a moment, as though considering something. ::However...I will allow you to remain an entire moon cycle if you couple with me. My heat is arriving soon and I feel you would sire interesting hatchlings:::

Toothless grunted, not knowing whether to be complimented or not. It was more likely he was the only dragon around these parts.
"It is not yet the season for my kind." He didn't know how he would react to another species of dragon and he wasn't due for another mating yen until seven more Resting spells. At least he assumed so. He feared the demon had thrown off his cycle.

"Season for what?" the tree asked.

::Nothing::

If only Hiccup could understand the female. The boy would be falling over himself at her frankness. The dragoness took the rebuff in stride.

::That is your pity:: she commented. Without another word in parting, she turned to the direction from whence she came and took off to the sky.

Toothless noted, with some happiness, that she wasn't as slow in flight as he originally thought. She was much slower.

"Season for what?" Hiccup asked again as he sidled up next to him. Toothless turned to the human who busily brushed bark from the seat of his pants where he leaned against the tree.

::Did you get food?::

Hiccup blinked at the sudden subject change and looked down at his empty hands.

"No."

::Go back in there!::

"But—"

::You said stupid things. More than usual. So you have to feed us::

And Hiccup found he couldn't argue with that logic because he had said an inordinate amount of stupid things.

"Fine," Hiccup sighed, though it sounded more like a pant. The boy wiped a good deal of sweat from his forehead with his arm and set to task.

Watching the reddened neck and back of Hiccup disappear into the cooler shade, Toothless realized that perhaps extreme heats humans were unaccustomed to could be unhealthy. And, subsequently, affect their rationality.

He decided he needed to keep his human from ever overheating again. Which reminded him...

::And cut your hair!::

"No!"

########

Chief of Berk and council,
This is a warning issued through my inability to put my past completely behind me. Given my unique position and understanding of dragons, I can act as a liaison between humans and dragons. Like it or not, I have discovered more about the nature of dragons than in all the last several generations of Berk.

I should start this letter by addressing the hardest matter to swallow: the reason for the war. Pardon my blunt deliverance but there is a demon within the dragon's nest, which controls the dragons and forces them to steal food from nearby settlements to feed it.

Please heed my warning and do not search for the nest anymore. From what I have gathered it is physically impossible for a human to reach it. I realize it is a great thing I ask of you and all I can do is offer my suggestion for the next raid to lessen the demon's attack force.

The demon's control over the dragons has boundaries—I do not know the specific boundaries, but I do know that Raven Point is at least free of it. That is how I gained the gratitude of the Night Fury. My suggestion is to try and knock the dragons out of this zone of control.

It may take more force than the common arm-strength of your Vikings, so I also suggest using specialized weapons for the task. My bola-launcher is one such example (if you haven't burned it along with whatever else I left). If you get the dragons out of this zone I am almost certain that it will be the last you see of them. It would also deal a blow to the demon's personal army. The more it is fed, the more power she holds, and that, I think, should be a high priority in ensuring your village's safety.

Let me remind you that this is simply what is gathered from the combined minds of myself and the Night Fury (an immensely intelligent dragon, if you'll believe me). Nothing we have is entirely concrete. I am continuing my research on the matter and hope to one day return to deal with the demon personally. Optimistically, this will end the raids. I am not asking for your participation, just your cooperation until the matter is settled.

I have done nothing to earn your trust, and everything to warrant your scorn, but I implore you to at least consider the truth behind my words, and I beg you to ignore the natural impulse to rebuff me and think of what is best for the village.

This war is going to end some day. I will to make sure of it.

Still alive,

Hiccup

"Well," Spitelout said, tossing the letter on the table after being the last to read it, "it's good tae know he hasn't gone feral."

Gobber barked out a laugh and a couple of other men chuckled but Stoick remained stony. Not once as the letter was passed through hands did his eyes leave the parchment.

"O' all th' malarkey!" Hoark shouted. "He sounds downright smug in this, he does!"

"I'd say more reserved condescension," Gobber suggested.

"It's the same thing," Ack deadpanned.

Stoick stroked his beard, ignoring his men's banter as he zeroed in on the very letter his son had been holding within months of this date.
Hiccup was always so formal in his letters (granted, there were only two) and almost completely devoid of personality. Not the one Stoick remembered, anyway. It could have been a cover, this detachment, almost like Hiccup shielded himself from his former clan. Was he treating them as a potential enemy?

Yes. He was.

As much as it pained Stoick, he also felt a small—**despised**—surge of pride. His son had some good sense in him, some survivalist attitude buried deep down in there. He had to, if he was still alive after all this time.

Though having a devil bewitch him demonstrated the weakest of spirits.

That is, if that happened at all.

The way Hiccup posed the letter made it seem like it was he who bewitched the devil, not the other way around.

Stoick found he would much prefer that. Not only would it put his son—*former son*—in a stronger light, but he found he couldn't swallow the thought of the opposite; that those devils had the intelligence to control humans into writing such formal letters. This would indicate far too much intelligence lurking in their sinister bodies for him to be comfortable with.

"What say you, Stoick?" Spitelout asked over Hoark and Gobber's razzing. He stared at his brother's face with the usual gruff, jutted jaw, but Stoick could make out the questioning and concern behind those dark irises.

The other men present all turned their stares to him.

"I'm going to be completely honest with you. I'm at a loss." Rarely did Stoick admit any weakness. But this was a matter so serious he felt he had to be completely candid with his men. This was a decision that had to be handled appropriately, a decision he couldn't make on his own. A decision that would affect their entire community—possibly for years to come. "Centuries of experience have taught us that it might very well be impossible to find the nest. How many hundreds of years have we spent searching for it? We located its approximate position but we can never quite reach it."

"Bewitched, it is," Gobber muttered and a couple other men nodded with murmurs.

"I believe *that* part, at least, of Hiccup's letter checks out. I vote that we—" Stoick took a breath, "we cease our searches of the nest. Temporarily."

The men present should have seen it coming, he gave enough headway, but it didn't stop the dubious mumbles that rippled across the table.

"If yeh're sure, then I'll second it," Gobber announced, throwing up a beefy hand with careless abandon. He looked to his fellows, "He's right. Nothin' ever comes of these hunts but broken ships and lost lives."

The reminder of the consequence of every failure had other hands joining the original pair.

"Then what do we do?" Spitelout spoke up. "Do we simply wait for each dragon raid? I know searching might indeed be futile, but he can't honestly expect us to sit here and do nothing!"

"Well that leads us to the next order of address, don't it?" Gobber suggested, turning to Stoick.
"These boundaries...this demon..." Stoick shook his head. "That is something I have a harder time believing."

"It would suggest dragons are not what we thought them to be," Ack murmured.

"There's no way centuries o' studying the beasts could prove false," Hoark fired up. "There's just no way. Demon or not, they're still dangerous. Even if we do hit them 'out of bounds'—they could still turn around 'n' attack us! What if they're worse without this control?"

Many of those present looked alarmed at the thought.

Gobber was less moved.

"Hiccup seemed to get along with the Night Fury well enough to ride it. 'N' they're supposed to be th' most aggressive."

Silence reigned for a moment.

"We know nearly nothing about Night Furies. There had been no contact with them before," Spitelout remarked reasonably.

Gobber shrugged. "Maybe we know less than we think about other dragons too."

"But we have had contact with them before—"

"Alright, enough! This isn't getting' us anywhere. We're still going to defend what's ours no matter what a letter says," Stoick declared, and the thought that they were still going to fight the devils heartened many of the men. "Regardless of why they're doing it, we're still being attacked. Knock 'em out of this "zone" if you must, we could even set up a squadron of individuals to do so, but predominately—we fight!"

"AYE!"

"Thank the Gods!"

"Don' know what I'd do with meself otherwise."

"Whit if he's right?" Ack asked quietly to Stoick, his voice falling under some of the more rowdy cheers. "What if it is time we end this war?"

Hearing him due to close proximity, Hoark butted in before Stoick could think on it.

"Fightin' dragons is what we do, it's what we've done fer generations. It defines us as Vikings," he stated impressively. His naturally loud voice returned all attention to the chief and his close company.

"Not all Vikings fight dragons," Ack pointed out. "Maybe it's time we start adapting to a new lifestyle?"

"We can't adapt to anything so long as they're still attacking us," Hoark countered.

"If Hiccup does return to defeat the demon—if this theory of control does prove right—we'll have to," Gobber added. Hoark looked frustrated.

"Then should we even let this happen? Maybe we should keep things as is! It's familiar, and tradition, at least."
Gobber opened his mouth, for the first time appearing wound up. Stoick laid a heavy hand on his shoulder.

"I understand what you are trying to say," he said to Hoark and he knew, unfortunately, many of Berk's inhabitants shared Hoark's sentiments. "Believe me, I want to uphold tradition as much as any other chief to oversee this island. But the truth is...the truth is Berk's not going to last much longer."

The hall had fallen unusually quiet, all wanting to hear this truth from the mouth of their leader. Stoick tried to meet each set of eyes as he delivered the harsh reality that had crept up on them. "The number of dragons has grown, as has the number of people on this island compared to food...’n’ both are causing us to run through resources faster and faster each year. We simply can't continue to live as we have."

It was the duty of each overseeing family to govern more than just rules; they had to control needs and means. They tried to keep the population contained, contraceptive herbs were commonly found in any household, but it was hard to find a balance for families. Sickness and a harsh living demanded more children for insurance—they needed future warriors—but too many led to this problem. With how fast they went through capitals—augmented exponentially by the thievery of the dragons—they were going to burn out within the next century.

Logically, eliminating this war with dragons would prove to be the most beneficial course of action in the long run.

Unfortunately, Vikings weren't known for thinking long-term.

"So where does that lead us?" Spitelout pushed, not a man to leave things open-ended. He wanted a concise decision, no matter its favor. "Do we believe this?"

He slapped the letter with the back of his hand.

"Why else would he send it? Hiccup was never malicious—he was a good kid," Gobber struck up. He looked around those gathered with hard eyes as though daring someone to say different.

"He left!" a voice called from out of his sight.

"He'll come back. Said so himself, dinne? What if—what if he did this all for us?" Gobber was looking at Stoick as he said this. This was a message to a still-grieving father. "He didn't have to inform us of anything. He could have left and never looked back. It sounds like he's well enough off. But he did. It could have been the plan all along."

Stoick did his utmost not too look nearly as wrenched as he felt. Not in front of his men.

"I would love to believe that Gobber, you know I would," anything for some redemption for his family, "but we can't afford to be that naïve."

Maybe Gobber could afford to have that kind of unbridled faith in people, but Gobber wasn't the chief, was he?

Stoick heaved a sigh, knowing a solid statement had to be made.

"Whether or not Hiccup returns, whether or not we see this war end in our lifetime, the reality is we are still in a war now. We need to be prepared for change, but fight as you've always fought. With the resilient, unyielding pride of a Viking!"

The hall rang with cheers, even with only the trusted present. Stoick maintained his hard face, encouraging the moral he had set, but knowing this was only delaying the inevitable. There was still
too much question.

A more solid decision could be made if they weren't left to so much speculation. They could have taken one of the more "domesticated" dragons from the arena to test the theory of boundaries and controlled behavior, had they still been there. The dragons in the arena were killed well over a year ago, within the same day Stoick learned of his son's betrayal, one after another. Each slaughter more gruesome than the next, each drawing a larger and larger cheering crowd. At the time it both served to strengthen the loyalty his clan had for him and remind them of his pure physical prowess. He was chief, and there was no better dragon killer than he.

Though a dragon at their disposal sure would be useful now, he did not regret killing them. He didn't think he'd ever forgive that race for taking his son from him, responsibility be damned.

Replenishing the dragon arena could move onto the agenda.

He would soon have to start grooming the next chieftain, and with no son at his side it would be his brother's by default, even if Snotlout left much to be desired in a chief. The lad had the image going for him, but it took more than brawn to run a village.

Not to say that the future would mirror the young man he knew today. The boy was still maturing and had many years before the passing of leadership would be necessary. He could make it work.

There was always... one other idea. A thought that niggled at the back of Stoick's mind, on and off, over the past year. The sort of idea that worried him—the idea of change. He was a man of tradition, he did not like change. But, perhaps it was time to change the dynamic of their leadership. Perhaps...perhaps they should start picking their leaders through sheer skill and popularity than birthright. That young girl—Astrid Hofferson—she had capability and command to spare. Despite the hard spell she hit after the death of her mother, the people still admired her; she had weeded out the traitor, chased him off, cleansed their village and not even Stoick could fault her for her actions.

It would be unorthodox, certainly, but maybe he could somehow convince Gritstone and Spitelout to arrange a marriage between their children. Astrid would certainly take charge in that relationship—hopefully anyway, considering how pigheaded Snotlout could be—and it would be a semi-transition into his idea of skill over birthright.

Stoick shook his head, realizing he was getting ahead of himself. Now was not the time to be thinking of changing even more things about their lifestyle. Not when their very culture was on the line.

His eyes strayed to the half-curled letter, forgotten and unassuming. Change was dangerous. Change was not a plague he should burden his already struggling village with.

It was just an idea, after all.

Chapter End Notes

** Art by Fjordmustang

That's right... Hiccup's not the only one who encounters ladies. Though he is the only one who's warm blooded, so it takes a bit more than a tail in the river to cool him down. Dehydration is a serious thing, kids.
That letter was actually "written" several weeks ago—back when Toothless suggested it during one of their night-flights. It just took that long to make it to Berk. Who knows if the Magyars ever got their hawk back.
Hiccup's boots molded to the soft ground with every careful shift in his weight as he approached his mark. The thin layer of snow coating the hard earth would occasionally crunch under his footing, but otherwise his skill in silently navigating through winter-like conditions had not been lost on him. His breath would have been visible if the air was just a shade colder and he found the night to be more perfect than any in recent memory.

The Old Mountain was a blessing to him. His time in the Balkans caused freckles to bloom across his skin faster than the most infectious of plagues, some clustered so close he looked of a whole other skin color. Toothless thought he was diseased for a while—first with the daily appearance of more freckles and then with the peeling skin from his sunburns. It took Hiccup nearly half a day to convince the Night Fury that humans did not shed their skin like snakes and that he was not dying. These reassurances did not stop Hiccup from directing Toothless straight to the first snow-capped mountain they fell across in the range. He could clearly remember the first—almost magical—burn of cold to his lungs and recalled how he had thrown himself, bare-backed onto the snow. It was a glorious moment, his return to the cold.

Hiccup shook his head, clearing the thoughts. He had a mission to complete, and he wasn't going to waste an entire day of reconnaissance just to rhapsodize over the wonderful climate. It took days of searching just to find a village established so high in the mountains, let alone one with a blacksmith!

He rested his back against the wall of the shop and inched his way closer to the door. The full moon illuminated the village—both enhancing his mobility in aiding his vision while hindering it by increasing his chances of being spotted. However, he wasn't entirely worried about that prospect. Of all the qualities he observed in the mountain-dwelling Bulgarians, the fear of being attacked was not among them. Thus, no night guards. And no lit windows, for that matter, nor smoking chimneys. Not even a whisper disturbed the night, and the moon had barely crested.

Hiccup wouldn't complain; their oddity was his boon. Hiccup didn't worry about the smith waking up to find him in the shop as he had finally found a use for the dried opium poppy. After pinpointing where the smith lived and waiting well into the night when he would surely be sleeping, Hiccup burned the poppy in a nicked, clay bowl, fanning the smoke to get it flowing under the large space between the bottom of the door and the ground.

From how Tünde explained their purpose, the effects should be strong enough to prolong and deepen one's slumber to the point of not waking during a vandal. Which was what he needed.

Once assured, the young traveler stole into the shop. He found a candle by the door, accompanied by a couple of spark rocks and immediately set to lighting the room. It was set up differently than Gobber's, not nearly as practical for moving about (in Hiccup's personal opinion), but had many of the same appliances. He shrugged the satchel full of materials he collected off of his shoulder and began to sift through the contents.

He had reeds for the stem, stone that could be molded into pointed shapes, and a collection of feathers for fletching. He had no illusions of creating anything remotely like the Magyar design, this
would be his first time actually crafting an arrow himself, but he only aimed to make something that could be fired.

Hiccup set to work, optimistic in the number of arrows he would produce from all the materials he had gathered.

But after spending half the night in the shop, attempting to muffle every sound he made, Hiccup ended up destroying more arrows than he created. If he didn't whet the rocks too far then he broke the reeds in his trials at hafting. His frustration mounted with each failure, perhaps making his work sloppier as he labored through supplies.

Eventually he had to stop when he ran out of material for arrowheads. He looked down at the five, technically launch-able projectiles he had managed to produce and sighed deeply. Granted, it was his first time crafting an arrow, Gobber certainly never taught him how, but he had hoped his skills as a blacksmith would give him a slight advantage. Maybe they had; maybe arrows were one of the most difficult weapons to make.

Or maybe those skills were rusting in his time away from the shop.

He rubbed his face, giving a little more attention to his eyes that began to burn with fatigue. He'd have to cut his losses and be thankful he managed to make any at all.

He could always buy them in the next town he came across. Certainly not this one in case someone recognized him as the guy who—

Hiccup paused in the midst of packing his supplies.

Something had caught the candlelight and glinted at him from a darkened corner of the room. His chest tightened in dread for a moment as his mind flew through scenario after scenario of some hulking villager catching him in the act. Or worse, the smith, back with a vengeance for a stranger's attempt to drug and hoodwink him.

But a second later of straining his senses told Hiccup it was safe to approach, and he did so, only to find a collection of arrows.

Hiccup let out such a breath of air that he had to wonder at the capacity of his lungs. Ignoring the sting of indignation over finding these now, after spending all the time and aggravation on creating his own, Hiccup counted his blessings that he would be able to leave with a good yield after all.

There were so many of them, piled upon each other like firewood stocked for a hard winter, that filling his own needs would not put a crippling dent in the supply. This village must have practiced archery as well.

Hiccup picked a few of them up to test their weight. They were of a simple craft, but out of practicality and not cheapness. The heads were heavier than he was used to practicing with, longer and thicker, and were probably meant for hunting large animals. There must have been a surplus of sorts with the way the arrows were tucked away under the table like an unfinished project.

Hiccup looked at the surface of the table where scraps of lustrous metals were scattered around like the smith suddenly had to leave.

An arrow lay amidst the clutter. It would have looked like any of the others aside from the silver-coated head.

People didn't hunt animals with silver-tipped arrowheads. What was the point? Why decorate the part
that would end up in a body? Most would decorate the shaft.

He shrugged. It didn't matter to him how fancy an arrow was so long as it did its job. He added it to the satchel of stolen goods anyway and finished cleaning up, making sure to leave no trace of his activities aside from a shorter candle and a dent in the arrow supply.

Hiccup exited the shop and stepped into the bright moonlight, sweeping his eyes across the silent streets one last time. He took a breath of the cool air, enjoying the crispness of the mountain frost for the umpteenth time. He was almost skeptical about how easy that was—the sneaking and the smithing—but, again, couldn't be bothered with it in light of his mood and his steal.

Perhaps living in the mountains made one a naturally heavy sleeper?

"Toothless?" Hiccup called when he reached their camp. It wasn't too far from the village, almost within visual distance, but after being in the town and not causing stir, Hiccup felt no need to keep his voice down.

He noticed the black hulking mass freeze. Hiccup perceived a distinct feeling of guilt from the other male.

"Toothless...turn around."

The dragon shifted around a bit, still keeping his back to Hiccup; the details of what Toothless was doing were sketchy at best, even under the full moon and blinding white snow.

Finally, Toothless turned around, his ears perked cutely and his cheeks suspiciously puffed out.

::Hi Hiccup! Get your arrows?:

Hiccup would not be fooled. There were bits of fluff around Toothless' mouth.

"Toothless!" he snapped and the dragon had the good sense to look contrite. "Did you eat someone's sheep again?"

::No:: the dragon insisted. His paw indiscreetly pushed a leftover hoof under the snow. Hiccup gave Toothless a long, hard look until the other's ears wilted.

::Sorry...but they're so tasty!::

"Honestly," Hiccup exhaled rather dramatically—though he may have just liked breathing the mountainous air that lacked all the humidity of river shores. "I told you: in settlements like these every sheep matters!"

::You're mad I didn't save you any:: Hiccup chose to ignore that comment as he didn't quite know if he'd be able to sincerely deny it. ::Besides, we're leaving soon. So I won't be tempted, right?:

Realizing he would never really be able to stop Toothless from stealing sheep Hiccup conceded, "Yeah, yeah... We should be reaching the Iskar any day now...and then we'll be out of the mountains and back into Múspellheimr."

::Drama queen:: Toothless scoffed as trotted behind Hiccup.
"You don't know what that means," Hiccup sang back. "Glutton."

::But I'm still using it right, right?:: Toothless grinned. He observed the clutch of arrows Hiccup set aside as he tried to make room in his basket for them.

::Those look relatively normal::

Hiccup pursed his lips, both at the comment and at his inability to find enough room in the bulging pack for more gear.

"I, uh, didn’t—" he coughed, "strictly speaking, make most of these."

He grabbed the biggest, heaviest object in the basket and yanked it out, upending several articles of clothing and various money sacks in the process.

::Why do you still have that?:: Toothless sighed, giving the axe a look of the deepest loathing.

Hiccup's face was unreadable, his stare blank and unfocused as he drew the axe up to a better angle in the light.

"I...don't know. But I can't just abandon it here."

It had somehow become a background item; like he knew it was there but never acknowledged it as something to ever be used. It hadn't left the pack since the first night of his "self-imposed exile".

His lip twitched, possibly to smile, possibly to grimace, and he stood from his crouch, bringing the weapon with him. He gingerly tested its weight with unforeseen ease and began to toss it from hand to hand. It was a well-balanced weapon. He had balanced it—he remembered that now—he had broken it by accident, too enthralled with having Astrid in proximity, and allowed the blade to chip on the spinning stone, forcing him to replace and rebalance the entire head.

He chuckled lightly, shaking his head. What had he been thinking? Allowing a girl to distract him like that while he was handling blades...

Hiccup gave the axe a small swing by the handle. He could also remember the difficulty in maneuvering it with two hands. Holding it now, he couldn't imagine being hunched over at the weight of a simple axe.

He briefly wondered...had he stayed on the island...would he be able to swing it as he could now?

Probably not. His time in the smith may have bulked him up a bit by now, but the entire island was too stifling for him to ever thrive.

As opposed to here, in the Balkans, drugging smiths and judging his progress by the standards of an axe.

He stared ahead at the clear outline of a tree, dimly detailed in the bright night.

::What are you doing?:: Toothless asked, sounding a tad apprehensive. Something about Hiccup holding an axe and looking...pensive put him on edge.

Raising the axe up, over and beyond his shoulder, Hiccup swung forward, mimicking everything he'd ever seen Vikings do, and released it on the downswing. It went awry, just barely hitting the tree he was aiming for but much higher than he intended.

::What was that?:: Toothless hissed, practically spitting at the boy. Hiccup with an uncontrolled axe
was worse than he imagined.

"I never threw an axe before!" Hiccup yelled in his defense, stomping over to retrieve the weapon. He yanked it out of the tree, realizing he must have overcompensated on the shoulder power. "I figured it was the same concept as throwing a dagger—spinning blade and all that—but it's completely weighted different."

::Ugh, just bury it in the snow::

"I can't!" Hiccup bemoaned, returning to his supplies and dropping the axe with contempt. He knew he was being unreasonable but he couldn't help how he felt. "I can't just leave it. It—it doesn't belong here. It needs to be back with Vikings."

::You are giving life to a weapon. Stop it. Besides, you just said you have no room for it::

The howl of a wolf pierced any argument Hiccup may have made. Or was it a wolf? Something sounded wrong to Hiccup. It was deeper, more guttural than he thought possible, but most definitely canine. Its ring echoed amidst the depressions between the Old Mountain peaks, making it nearly impossible to pinpoint where it originated and causing goose bumps to run errant along Hiccup's arms.

Not that he was scared. Even if he didn't have Toothless at his side, he wasn't completely defenseless anymore.

"I guess the wolves run bigger out here...just like the dragons," the boy snorted and set to busying himself with fitting everything in the pack once more. It was a fruitless endeavor; the basket was at its limit.

Toothless lightly biffed the top of Hiccup's head with his tail.

::First of all, you're a diseased snake. Second, those are not natural wolves::

Hiccup turned in his crouch, one hand on his hip and a wry smile on his lips.

"Making them what? Stuffed wolves?"

Toothless shook his head and looked to the east where more trees were knotted in tandem; a likely place for predators to dwell. The smile fell from Hiccup's face as he realized Toothless' pupils were constricted sharply in the restricted lighting.

::I have seen them many times back with my drove. The humans called them Adlets::

"Ehdlets," Hiccup tried the word. It didn't sound scary enough for something that just made that noise.

::They're more powerful than wolves. Faster too. And they hunt humans to drink their blood. They're even known to eat each other::

Hiccup didn't know if this was true or if Toothless was trying to mess with him. He still couldn't get rid of the goose bumps no matter how much he tried to discretely rub his arms.

Toothless must have noticed Hiccup's unease because he gifted the human with a gummy smile.

::Luckily for us...they don't like fire::

"And you don't know for sure if these are the same thing...these Ehdlets...right?"
Another howl sounded just after he said this, this time louder, closer, and accompanied by a few, varying tones of growls.

::If not then a very close relative::

"Maybe we should pack up," Hiccup muttered, all too aware of how unconfident he sounded. Surprisingly, Toothless consented.

::We should. I don't know how many of them there are, and they are closer than what I'm comfortable with::

"Don't need to tell me twice," Hiccup said and he redoubled his efforts to fit everything into the basket. He gave up soon enough, instead slinging the satchel full of arrows over his shoulder. It would probably prove to be more beneficial to have them at the ready anyways, even if it was a pain in the ass to have so many things hanging off him as he flew.

He took the time to string his bow as well. Just in case.

::We need to get in the air:: Toothless announced with an urgency that had Hiccup all but throwing the saddle over his back. Every trace of calm was gone from the dragon and Hiccup knew this meant these Adlets were practically hounding them.

A horrible growl startled Hiccup into missing the buckle for one of the saddle straps. He looked around Toothless to find something out of his nightmares.

"What...is that?" Hiccup breathed.

It certainly wasn't a wolf—not like one he'd ever seen. This was far too large for one—more than half the size of Toothless—and its body could only be described as disfigured for a wolf. Normal wolves didn't have such human-like muscles shaping the matted fur. As it stalked out from the shadows of the trees it moved as something that was hunched and using its arms to aid walking rather than the ease of a four-legged creature.
Hiccup could sense the movement further beyond the wolf-monster, heard the growls overlay, and somehow he knew there were more of them. It was still a pack animal.

::Hiccup...::

Hiccup shook his head, forcing his vision to tunnel on the straps and ignore the horrifying monster heading his way.

"I'm going, I'm going!"

Fingers finally under control, Hiccup just managed to get the saddle strapped correctly when Toothless darted away from his reach. Hiccup's surroundings came back to him and he witnessed Toothless intercepting the lead Adlet that had suddenly made it to them in no time.

They were fast.

Toothless blew a plasma bolt at the beast while it was in mid-pounce. It struck the muscled stomach and it thrashed, helplessly, still airborne, pitching a long, high whimper. Toothless followed through his own fire to catch the Adlet around the middle and crunched down on its ribs.

Hiccup winced at the sharp crack, already pulling his bow from his back. He nocked the first arrow he drew from the satchel and steadied it at the quickly encroaching followers. There were at least a dozen of them, large and hulking and slinking towards Toothless with far more weary movements than the first. The quick disposal of their leader must have put them off enough to slow down, but not to back off completely. They still hungered for something.

Toothless roared much like he had when he first met Hiccup; a resonating, archaic sound that inspired foreboding. A few of the Adlets scooted backwards, ears down and recognizing a superior creature. The rest continued to scurry forwards.

::Accursed mongrels!::

Toothless shot out two, high-powered fireballs, sending several more of the creatures scampering back with startled yelps. The snowy ground would have made shooting fire far less effective if it weren't dragon fire, which could linger on material long after others would smother to a flame.

The blazing barrier caused a long cease in the Adlets' advance, and for a moment Hiccup felt his hope flare, thinking the fire would be enough to send the creatures running.

And then they were moving again, spurred into motion rather than retreat. Hiccup caught a glimpse of bloodshot, golden eyes bulging in the firelight as the beasts began dashing around the flames as though they were intent on destroying them.

Saliva flew from their mouths in long strings like infected animals. They were possessed by evil, charging, unthinking, at the pair despite being obviously outclassed by a dragon. Somewhere in their savage minds lay the comprehension that they had numbers on their side.

Hiccup fired off an arrow—catching one in the neck halfway through a leap and throwing it backward—before his bow was loaded once more. The downed creatures only left an imprint in the snow and it was back on its feet, blood dribbling around the neck wound and staining the snow. It may have attacked again but Toothless finish it off with a quick fireball straight to the face and a swipe of his paw that nearly took its head off.

Hiccup didn't have time to react to the horror of realizing how hard they would be to kill, he had to shoot back another one a second later.
"Don't let them bite you! They're diseased!": Toothless ordered. Hiccup wouldn't have let them bite him anyway, diseased or not. They could probably kill him with the first mouthful.

Toothless did his part in leaping from monster to monster, often disabling them with one good crunch and being careful with choosing how to use his fire bolts. Hiccup stayed back, knowing he was at a disadvantage with his soft, human flesh and poor vision in the night; instead he fired off his newly made (and stolen) arrows, aiming for the most vital points and guessing where an Adlet would be at the time the arrow hit by gauging their speed and movements.

He felt cautious of this role; Toothless moved fast, and though his dark hide gave him an advantage in taking out prey, Hiccup couldn't help but be hesitant in his firing for fear of accidentally hitting his friend. His practice with the Magyars specialized in targeting stationary targets while moving himself. Now he faced the opposite. He only had his talent for quick deduction in calculating a target's future position.

But the monsters were resilient in that it took several arrows to keep one down and Hiccup soon realized he was running low on ammunition. He couldn't rely on Toothless to take down every Adlet he maimed—the dragon was already occupied in his own flurry of movements, trying to keep the Adlets far enough from Hiccup for the human's arrows to be effective.

Though the rush of warring bodies may give the illusion of a quick scuffle, Hiccup's rushing blood and racing mind seemed to put the world in slow motion. In a way it helped; he felt he had the time to focus on his precision and an odd sort of detachment befell him that helped him keep his head.

He wasn't sure how much time had passed before there were at least ten bodies littering the reddened snow, with more still dancing around the flames. Hiccup did, however, acknowledge that the commotion they participated in should have been impossible to ignore. The absolute ruckus of these bellowing hounds, the range of sensational blue fire covering the ground... all of these should have stirred at least some attention from the village. And yet, somehow, Hiccup better understood why the community seemed so oddly shut down. The locals knew of these creatures.

Toothless was backing up towards him slowly, even as he fought off the Adlets, and Hiccup picked up on the silent plead opening to hop on the saddle. It would be for the best, Hiccup realized, as he grabbed the last arrow in his quiver—the heaviest he had yet to fire. He bit his lip, sparing a moment to glance at the metal-coated tip, and took aim. This one had to count.

The three remaining Adlets charged Toothless at once. The dragon wacked one back with his tail, biting at another with his teeth, catching it clear around the neck, and the third got blasted back in the chest by Hiccup's last arrow. A single arrow to the chest wasn't enough to kill them, Hiccup knew this by now, but surely it would buy Toothless enough time—

A howl of supreme agony erupted from the pierced Adlet. Hiccup jumped. He watched it writhe on the ground, screaming like no other creature should scream. Smoke rose from the arrow wound, the hiss of cooking flesh drowned out by the monster's misery but not the smell, which hit Hiccup even from where he stood, and he had to fight down a lurching stomach.

The full moon gave Hiccup a clear vision of what was happening and, though a nauseating picture, he found he couldn't take his eyes off it. The fur of the Adlet's chest started to melt inward at the entry point of the wound; the damage circled out like the ripples in a pond. Skin and fur and flesh sinking down as molten wax would, blackening, curling and evaporating, until all that was left of the wretch was a twisted frame of bloody, fur-matted bones.

Hiccup continued to stare, his mouth open, forgetting to breathe yet unwilling to take in the air that was just exposed to...
Hiccup hadn't heard the Adlet coming in his awe of witnessing such a horrific process. He turned in time to see the last, hair-raising beast descending on him, naught an arms-length away from him with its long maw open and tongue curled back.

Hiccup's brain really only registered teeth and death.

He hardly had time to scream let alone fire an arrow he did not have. Hiccup managed to hold the bow out in front of him, using it to occupy the beast's mouth in place of what would have surely been his head. The mighty jaws snapped down on it, the jarring vibrations of the bite shaking the very bones of the arm holding it.

The Adlet would have landed on him too if a force of black wrath didn't sideswipe it from its intent. Hiccup stumbled to the ground, hearing the crash of two larger bodies hit the snow next to him. Instinctively, he rolled away from the clash.

The savage snarls quelled in the next instant and Hiccup, gasping heavily, scrambled back to his feet to find Toothless giving the unmoving—and heavily bleeding—body a deserving strike for good measure.

"Is THAT the last of them?" Hiccup cried, his eyes wide and wild.

He turned his head every which way—to the trees, to the village. Nothing moved aside from the remains of Toothless' flames. In fact, everything seemed too calm after all that. He just experienced it and Hiccup already had trouble believing such an intense and terrifying scuffle happened at all. It was so fast with so little warning, already a memory.

Hiccup placed a hand to his thumping chest, willing his heart to slow. And as it slowed, his heated body began to shake as the last of his energy left him. Time came back to him, reality came back to him.

::Yeah:: Toothless responded gruffly. ::There aren't any left::

He spit a stray ember clinging to the back of his throat down at the Adlet he just trounced. He recalled fighting such creatures with his brethren long ago, before the demon, back when he only cherished his pride and standing. It was a game then, dangerous and stupid and full of posturing.

Fighting when he had something to protect took much of the fun out of such pastimes, and no matter how much he wanted to dredge up old feelings of triumph, standing over the bodies he downed, he was only conscious of unrelenting relief. And the lingering itch of fear that still scraped against the inside of his chest.

They had gotten so close...so close to him.

The dragon shook his head and tried to stamp out the ridiculous emotions of concern that insisted on remaining in the wake of a victory. Hiccup was fine and they defeated the Adlets. There was no sense in feeling this way.

"We should still leave," Hiccup announced, unable to hide his weariness. His body managed to experience a combination of heaviness and jitters and he just wanted to curl up next to Toothless to sleep. But not here.

Hiccup began to a slow trudge back to his belongings, some of which ended up scattered around their site thanks to the unwelcome visitors. He weaved around incomplete carcasses, occasionally
bending to pick something up, unable feel pity for the brutality of their ends and unable to work up a suitable queasiness for the carnage left behind. He really was too exhausted to feel anything aside from mild irritation. It had simply happened—they were attacked and they survived—there was nothing more to it.

His feet eventually took him back to Toothless' side, who stared at the splintered remains of the bow Domokos gave him. Hiccup joined him in the silent comprehension of the previously unaccounted victim.

::Wow:: Toothless finally uttered. Beside him, Hiccup shook his head.

"It...it didn't even last two months and it's already..."

::Wow:: Toothless repeated.

Hiccup looked at him. "Do you even know what that means?"

::Possibly. But it sounds right for the circumstances::

Hiccup tried it out for himself.

"Wow."

And somehow he felt he could accept the loss of the bow much easier now having voiced his sentiments on the matter.

::At least you can fit the axe in now:::

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::Damnit Hiccup! Stop bouncing on my back!::

"I can't help it! We're almost there!"

Hiccup knew he was behaving far too excitable for someone his age, but the anticipation of finally seeing the walls of Miklagard was too great for him to contain. Jitters plagued him all morning.

They had left the last of the Maritsa River two weeks ago, heading straight east at the fork where the river turned completely south. On Hiccup's insistence they took less and less breaks as they approached to The Great City, covering more ground than they usually would. They still took the time to practice some blindfolded flying, but without a bow it had lost some of its effect.

The loss of his weapon had put a bit of a damper on the boy's feelings of security. He still had his dagger, and he still had his dragon, but his hand-to-hand combat consisted of a mixed visual collection and wrestling with Toothless. He actually felt a little naked without the feeling of the weapon at his back, not that he admitted such to Toothless lest he be subjected to some misunderstood and inappropriate humor.

But now that they were on the cusp of reaching Miklagard, his spirits were lifted. He had wanted to see the walls his grandfather spoke of for as long as he could remember, and he was making it happen. On his own terms.

And he could buy a new bow there. And arrows. And a bigger pack. And materials to upgrade
Toothless' saddle.

::We should have waited a bit before setting off. It's too likely we'll be spotted if we keep flying in the light like we've been:: Toothless didn't sound worried, more exasperated that Hiccup's boyish excitement could get them in trouble.

The sun had barely begun to set, making them as a clear silhouette to even the most aged eye. The farther they moved away from the inland, the closer they came to bodies of water, and with water came greater gatherings of humans. The greatest gathering if what he heard of Miklegard was true.

How to deal with that many humans and a Night Fury was something to be figured out later. After he saw the walls.

"After this we'll only travel well after dark," Hiccup promised. After all, he didn't want to be responsible for any misfortune because he momentarily lost his head over a silly ambition.

And then he remembered that some greater power out there hated him.

Hiccup didn't quite know how it happened or when or where they were positioned in the air for it to even be possible. One minute they were flying, making casual plans for their journey as they always did, and in the next his ears were occupied by a whooshing—a potent, deafening 'whooshing'—before the power of Thor's hammer slammed into his side.

The pain was numbing, and too sudden for him to feel anything but disorder in the first moments of suspension.

He was wrapped—he couldn't move his foot—oil and twine filled his nostrils, not quite overpowering but enough to make him dizzy. The sensation of uncontrolled falling rushed his stomach. He couldn't feel Toothless' wings beating at his heels anymore.

And as their descent started to pick up speed Hiccup's brain finally caught up with the situation. He placed what had ensnared them. He understood. They were spotted, they were targeted, and they were caught.

And he knew the ground was coming up to meet them at a dangerous velocity.

"Toothless—!" he gasped, needing to know his companion was still with him. He was being pushed against the netting as the Night Fury struggled against the bindings.

::Hiccup!:: Toothless mirrored his distress and Hiccup was suddenly reminded that Toothless had experienced this at least once before, that he had the misfortune of knowing what was to come if they didn't free themselves soon.

Hiccup tried to reach for the dagger at his belt, but found himself too confined to move his arms enough. Toothless fired a plasma bolt the best he could, trying to burn through at least one end of the net and not caring what got struck in the process. It sort of worked, snapping a couple knots directly in front of the dragon's face, but whatever oil coated the ropes made them resistant to burning quickly. Instead the fire clung to their bindings, adding a heat that Hiccup could barely feel, thanks to the terror swiftly sweeping over his mind.

Hiccup felt Toothless trying to twist in the air, preparing to hit the ground belly down. The ground that was suddenly right there.

"Toothless, don't—!"
The rest of Hiccup's sentence cut off as they made contact with the unforgiving earth.

Don't try to protect me. This is my fault. Don't die for me. Don't make me live without you.

I don't want to live without you.

Chapter End Notes

What? Two mythical creatures in two chapters? Will the wonders never cease? (Those were werewolves, if you didn’t get it. Toothless remembers them as something different)

And now...we get closer to the heart of the matter.
Hiccup finds himself in the custody of Vikings and receives a grim reminder to why he left.

There was pain in his arm...somewhere between his elbow and his wrist. For a while it was the only feeling Hiccup registered.

Then the pain grew, steadily and quickly as his mind picked up speed, swift in taking over much of his jumbled thoughts. Still, he made no noise or movement for it; he was too exhausted, trapped in a place where he wasn't sure what was real, if he were still flying or not. His weight seemed to have left him, like he was being carried...over someone's shoulder where their armor dug into his stomach and the blood rushed to his head.

The slow growing awareness picked up a noise outside his mind. At first a hum, then indistinguishable blather, then the familiar and most unwelcome words of Norse.

"...shot. I could have—"

"—never heard of...could be a new—"

"...been a while...maybe—"

_Captured. Captured. They were captured._

Reality slammed into him with the might of Thor's hammer—_they fell!_—dread crushed his heart —_Toothless!_—and, just as Hiccup meant to open his eyes, to struggle and kick to the last of his strength, he was thrown.

"AAARGH!"

He landed on the compact ground for the second time in who-knew how long; he landed on an obviously already broken arm. He didn't hear the slamming of a door or the cruel laughter of his captors from well beyond his sight. For a moment longer, Hiccup refused to acknowledge anything outside of his own mental chaos and physical torment. He whimpered, desperately swallowing back another scream, and curled in on the appendage, slowly trying to roll his weight off it. Nothing he did would ease the pain; agony swelled with every movement.

"Oh...gods..." he moaned, taking a deep gasp of air once he was on his back. His breathing became particularly labored as he tried to manage the pain and panic. He didn't know how long it took for the mind-consuming burn to subside enough to think somewhat clearly again, or how long he spent lying on his back, the misshapen bump beneath his skin held gingerly to his chest.
Hiccup may have fallen asleep at some point, or fallen into a trance, but for a long while he simply didn't know what was what in the world. It was as though some part of his psyche tried to suppress all rational, tried to keep him from thinking clearly, to protect him from having to deal with what was surely a very painful truth.

However, his kept circling back to one subject until he realized what was amiss.

"T-Toothless," he gasped, his eyes were open now—or at least he thought they were. Nothing but darkness surrounded him. Somewhere in his subconscious he recalled the limited echoes of a door shutting, he knew that he was in a small room of sorts, with no window or light fixtures.

A prison.

"Too-Toothless," he stuttered again, his eyes wide and desperate for any shred of light to show him that he wasn't alone.

He knew he was alone. No breathing or shifting other than his own accompanied him, no presence of the dragon could be felt—something he hadn't realized had become a constant until it was gone. Everything felt wrong without a connection to Toothless.

"Toothless...Toothless..."

He clambered to his feet, still breathing through his pain. Sweat slid from his brow—he hoped it was sweat—and he could taste blood on his lip. His face throbbed and his nose pulsed in time to his rushing blood. It was probably bleeding, but not broken. His feet shuffled along the ground and he inched forward with his good arm outstretched, trying to make contact with a wall he couldn't see.

His right arm. His wrong arm. He had been reaching for his dagger with this left, which was probably why it was damaged from being held at a hard angle upon impact.

"Toothless..." his voice cracked. His throat felt raw, like he inhaled too much dirt. "Toothless..."

He continued the weak mantra until his fingertips brushed something of stone. His breathing turned quick and shallow as his palm slapped against the wall, seeking out a hinge or a change of material, anything to show him an exit.

Eventually he hit metal, and nimble, shaking fingers danced around the outline, trying to determine where the handle would be.

He couldn't find one. Nowhere along the border could he feel a handle, which told Hiccup it was a one-sided door. And locked—of course it was locked, he was a prisoner! There was no way to escape. He couldn't get out. He couldn't get to Toothless.

Toothless, who was out there, somewhere, dead or alive, in the hands of Vikings.

Hiccup couldn't stave off the truth any longer. He couldn't keep his mind from clearing, couldn't hide in that safe state of confusion and denial. True horror seized him.

"Toothless!" he screamed this time, and threw his weight against the door. "Odin damn-it! Let me out, you bastards!"

If he held onto his anger he could trick himself into thinking his arm didn't hurt nearly as much as it did. If he held onto his anger he could keep the overwhelming guilt at bay.

He struck and struck the door, sometimes with this good arm, other times with his foot. Each strike
was punctuated by a howl.

"Toothless!"—*slam*—"Where is he!"—*slam*—"Answer me,"—*slam*—,"damn-it!"—*slam*—"Toothless!"

Every clout antagonized his break, granting him the suffering he deserved, a pain he needed to feel as some sort of repentance for how he wronged his best friend.

No matter how hard he wailed on it, the door wouldn't give, no one would respond. There was probably no one out there. Why stick around to guard an imprisoned boy when they had a legendary Night Fury to torment?

Hiccup hit the door again, but this one lacked the fervor and desperation he once so strongly projected, creating a hollow sounding thud to mirror his heart.

"Please," he moaned, a dry sob following, "please..."

Toothless wasn't responding. Toothless was nowhere near. Toothless was, for all he knew, dead.

He killed his best friend. Because he was selfish and childish and so caught up in his new freedom that he was wholly unprepared for when reality snuck up on them.

The scales of a dragon's wings were harder than any other on their body. They had to be, as they covered their most crucial appendages; appendages that spent more time stretched out and vulnerable than tucked into the body.

This was something he learned from Toothless, not anything taught to humans by humans. If a dragon fell, they used their wings for protection. If they were expected to be vulnerable in any situation, they cocooned themselves in their wings. It was a reflex, an instinct.

But Toothless ignored instinct. He fell, belly down, to save the stupid, weak human on his back.

How could Toothless do that? Why would he...why would he choose death...for him? Hiccup could not find the logic in it and would have loved indulge in his anger towards at Toothless for being so self-sacrificing if despair hadn't taken up so much of his energy.

Was it because Toothless felt obliged to do it? Had Toothless done it because he didn't think he
would be able to take on the demon himself and didn't want to live with a smear on his pride? Or had he done it because he loved Hiccup as Hiccup loved him?

Maybe...maybe Toothless felt the same way Hiccup did. That there would be no living without his other half, even if he were still alive.

Toothless was his family. The only family he had left. If he had killed his bondmate—if Hiccup indirectly ended Toothless’ life—then he wouldn't be too far after.

For the first time since he could remember, Hiccup felt like crying.

He didn't just feel like crying, he felt hysterical. His breathing grew rapid and shallow; the pain in the left half of his body spurred the downward spiral into bedlam. Guilt so potent he wanted to die choked him.

Hiccup gripped his break again, releasing a rough scream at the physical torment he inflicted on himself. It released him from his introspection—if only for a moment—and his breathing came a little easier.

He closed his eyes and tried to control himself. He tried, in vain, to stop the hot tears brimming along his eyelids from dropping. He tried to keep his breathing under control, to keep it from escalating to a point where he would pass out. He tried to focus on remedying the situation rather than sitting there, brooding and hurting himself to stay sane.

Hopeless and helpless, no matter how hard he tried to think of fixing the future, his mind was stuck in the past. He kept replaying what happened time and again, making changes that would have avoided the whole disaster—a reality where they hadn't left before dusk, a reality where he had been paying attention to their surroundings and avoided the trap.

This reality though, the one he suffered through now, was happening, and dwelling on 'what if's wasn't going to change that.

Hiccup thudded his head against the metal door.

Sad. It was so sad. Toothless' situation was sad. Here was a Night Fury who had his freedom taken from him, a proud creature who was first enslaved by a demon and then had his free flight stolen. Toothless rendered his services to a frail human that could keep him airborne and then...and then willingly put himself at the mercy of Vikings for that human.

Tears fell, each leaving a burning trail down his cheek, but Hiccup refused to touch them. He refused to release the sobs building behind his tongue. He kept the need bottled in his throat and chest, perhaps trying to suffocate himself from the emotional pressure that mounted. He felt sick. He probably would have thrown up if he had eaten recently, but he was so excited to see Miklagard that he hadn't eaten. He wanted to see the city where his mother spent her youth, to see the walls that could stop the most committed Vikings in their tracks, to see the landmark of his childhood stories.

This was not how he wanted to see the walls, as a prisoner, alone and repentant.

But he couldn't take all the credit.

It was Vikings who did this, who shared in this responsibility. He hadn't seen them, but they spoke Norse and he had heard the northern accents. They probably saw a dragon and couldn't help themselves, most likely reveling in their capture of the elusive Night Fury at that very moment. Drinking, celebrating, patting each other on the back, not realizing how much pain their joy could cause, not thinking of those they hurt...
And, in that moment, Hiccup hated Vikings. He hated them. He hated them in all their close-minded, superstitious, selfish, empty-headed and destructive glory. He hated his father for never being able to accept all that he was, he hated his peers for making him feel like he was wrong for existing, he hated Berk for ostracizing anyone who was different. He hated Astrid for not listening, for not imagining what they could do, what they were capable of, if people just opened their eyes...

Hiccup sprung to his feet, chest heaving, and gave the door a mighty kick, one that had to have been heard well outside of the prison. It jostled his arm, sending bone-deep pain shooting up the limb, but Hiccup grit his teeth and ignored it. He deserved it.

"Oi! Knock it off!"

For a moment Hiccup's breath caught in his throat—someone was there!—and then his senses came back to him.

"Go to Hel!" he barked back. "Let me out, right now! Bring me to my dragon!"

The sudden, but gratifying, response of scraping metal and an echoing thud told Hiccup the door was being unlocked.

All self-preservation instincts had left him; he hadn't backed up, hadn't gone into a fighting stance. He only wanted to passionately hate his captors as he had been doing, and to be as defiant as possible in the process. He was injured and smaller than them, but he was good at being difficult. That much he knew.

The daylight assaulted him before the Viking had. Hiccup didn't know how long he had been in the prison—it could have been anywhere from days to minutes—but the sudden onslaught of bright whiteness burned into the very shell of his eyes. He blinked rapidly, turning a glare on the hulking silhouette of the man in the doorway.

"Yeh have a lot o' attitude fer someone in so much trouble," the man said. His voice was deep, and somehow loud and soft all at once, like he could speak calmly, lightly, but be heard anywhere.

"Where is my dragon?" Hiccup hissed. "Is he alive?"

He took a step forward, towards the light and towards the undeniably dangerous man. The temptation of running past the Viking came only once and then was dismissed as purely suicidal. Hiccup needed to stay alive long enough to make some good decisions.

"'E's not dead, if that's what you're askin'," a new, more youthful voice said from outside the prison. A second Viking lurking beyond his view.

"Take me to him!" Hiccup demanded, hiding his relief at the piece of information. The front figure moved at the command—too fast for Hiccup to follow—and the boy soon found a painful grip squeeze around the back of his neck, forcibly dragging him from the cell.

He wanted to get out of the small chamber. He did not want to be carted out like some wild animal. Hiccup squirmed and snarled, bucking and kicking, unwilling to be handled in such a way.

"Let g—don't touch me!"

The meaty fingers tightened against the sinews of his neck, pulling at the hair caught between hand and head. Hiccup found his face being dragged towards the Viking's, a square-jawed, middle-aged man with a well-kept beard and sleek, dark brown hair. If anything, he resembled an older Snotlout,
which helped Hiccup greatly in maintaining his righteous anger.

The Viking bared his teeth at his captive.

"You don't get to make demands, you traitorous filth!"

Hiccup growled, an almost inhuman sound, and scratched at the hand holding him with his only good one. A pointless endeavor; it was gloved.

"I'd rather be a traitor than a Viking!"

Instantly, Hiccup's neck was released, and before he could fully straighten or enjoy a moment of freedom, the Viking belted Hiccup in the face—right on a cheekbone already bruised from the fall. Hiccup, to his credit, did not stagger under the blow. He straightened back up in almost the same movement, spitting blood at the man's feet.

"Where is my dragon?" he asked again with deadly calm. They could hit him all they wanted, but he only had one goal in mind.

The second man laughed, "What an attitude, indeed! This'un's going to be fun, Bolli!"

Hiccup spared a glance at the other, much younger, Viking he had forgotten about. Flaming red hair, a close-trimmed, dark goatee, and, if possible, more girth than the first one.

Hiccup closed his eyes and reigned in every violent impulse. Swearing at them and making demands was not going to get him anywhere, he should have known that. Vikings can't help but give as good as they get.

"Look," he tried again, doing his best to keep a civil tongue, "I need to see Toothless, if you just listen—"

"Oh, yeh'll be seein' your friend again!" the redhead assured him boisterously. "We got a bit of a show planned out for you—"

"Halvdan," the other Viking—Bolli—cut across. He looked stern, but not angry. "Go and tell Harald I'm bringing the little savage to the 'Drome."

Halvdan, seemingly impossible to dispirit, gave a funny salute.

"Right-oh!" And then he sauntered off, in no particular hurry, still enjoying his day to the fullest.

Bolli returned his harsh hold to the boy's neck. Before Hiccup could even think of struggling, he found himself looking into slate-blue eyes.

"If you want to see your creature alive, I suggest you behave," Bolli hissed, breathing air of ale and overstored meat onto the boy's face.

And that did it.

Hiccup allowed himself to be manhandled through a maze of busy streets and back alleys, unable to meet the eyes of onlookers, unable to bother with memorizing the path, only thinking of reaching his best friend in any way possible. Even through humiliation.

########
"Welcome to the Hippodrome!"

There was nothing welcoming about the way his minder said it, but Hiccup lifted his eyes anyway to take in the awesome structure.

Some part of Hiccup's mind registered the wide racing-track that circled within a groomed space—a huge arena, beautifully sculpted, enclosed by stands. He barely acknowledged the people lingering in the rows and rows of seats, a slowly gathering crowd that had come to sate their curiosity of this great capture.

He couldn't bother himself with any detail other than the large, dark figure unmoving in the center of the court, draped in chains and surrounded by a horde of Vikings.

"Toothless!"

He moved so fast and so suddenly that he managed to slip out of Bolli's grip.

"Ay! You little—!"

Hiccup ignored the Viking's enraged howl, only focusing on the dragon that wasn't moving. Why wasn't he moving?

"Toothless—!"

The Viking from before, Halvdan, sprung forward and managed to catch Hiccup by his hair before the boy could invade any further into the buffer of Vikings separating him from the dragon. Hiccup was jerked back, giving a small cry of pain.

"Woah!" Halvdan exclaimed with a slight chuckle. He seemed to be having too much fun with the entire situation. "You more of a beast than your beast, boy!"

"Please—just let me—"

He reached piteously with his unbroken arm, wanting desperately to just touch Toothless, to feel some sort of warmth off of that body, to connect himself to his best friend one last time.
He was pulled away, a thick arm wrapped in vambraces curled around his neck and Hiccup became anchored to a stronger body, losing more mobility.

::It's...It's okay...::

Hiccup used all his power not to sob with relief. Toothless was alive. One green eye opened and focused on his human, an action that did not go unnoticed by the Vikings. Some shouted in alarm, pointing their spears and grabbing a hold of their axes. When Toothless made no other movement other than look at Hiccup, the shoulders of their captors relaxed once more.

In spite of their situation, Hiccup held on to that quickly slipping euphoria and gave a shaky smile to the dragon.

"Hey buddy," he croaked, his throat sore from all the screaming he had been doing.

::Hiccup... You're okay...::

That Toothless struggled to even communicate with him concerned Hiccup.

The Vikings only heard a low groan emerge from the beast, unaware to the conversation.

"Yeah," Hiccup responded quietly. "How are you doing?"

Toothless didn't answer right away. He closed his eye again, focusing on breathing, and Hiccup bit his lip. This was bad.

"Fool's gone mad, he has," one of the Vikings mumbled to another.

::Nothing... I can't... survive::: Toothless finally replied.

Hiccup forced a barely perceivable smile on his face.

"Same here," he whispered.

They could still survive this. The situation could be saved.

"Well, here's your friend!" one of the Viking's announced, stepping between Hiccup and Toothless, giving the boy no choice but to look at him. This man stood with more prestige than any of the surrounding Vikings. He had thick, flowing blond hair that fell to his shoulders and a full, combed beard. His face was a handsome one, one that had not yet lost the smoothness of youth, but old enough to gain respect on sight.

He dressed in the same uniform as the other men; a long tunic, embroidered and belted with leather boots and forearm guards. A red cape flowed beneath the roundshield on his back and clasped at the neck by a jeweled broach. Some of the other men had chainmail on, with iron, conical helmets atop their heads, but not this man. He seemed relaxed in the presence of a dragon and its feral boy.

"My name is Harald," he introduced himself, cordial and completely unrepentant for any grief he may have caused. "It is my duty tae protect this empire and I am the one who made the decision to shoot down this dragon. You have one chance, and one chance only, to explain yourself or you'll be put down like the beast."

Hiccup was dimly aware of the stares he currently, and had, received. His hair was thick with dirt and knots, long and wild. His clothes were torn and blood dried on his face, crusting over dirt-smeared skin. He must have looked like a barbarian. No one would back him up, no one would take
his side no matter how innocent or well intentioned he was. Not with a line of finely dressed protectors keeping custody over them.

He had to do this right.

"He's...he's my dragon," Hiccup slowly started to explain. He didn't meet anyone's eye; he preferred to focus only on Toothless. "We're—I'm a rider. I'm a rider and... please, just don't hurt him!"

"We are Vikings, boy," Harald told him as if he couldn't have figured it out on his own. "Hurting dragons is what we do."

It was then, after being in their presence for the short time, that Hiccup finally puzzled out their identity. Vikings, in Miklagard, protecting the empire...but recognizing northern dragons. These weren't just Vikings. These were the Væringjar.

Hiccup swallowed. He heard of them. Vikings who worked for the emperor of another land, trading in their pasts for gold and a solid, well-paid life. Pure loyalty.

If the emperor ordered them to be killed, there likely wasn't much he could do to convince them otherwise.

"You're from the north," Harald stated following a moment of silence from Hiccup. He posed it as more of a question.

"So are you," Hiccup returned. He'd recognize the accent from anywhere.

"Are you aware that Vikings from the north make a sport of—"

"Spare me your corrupt reasoning," Hiccup interrupted sharply, his voice sodden with contempt. "I came from a Viking clan."

"Just kill him, Harald," Bolli said. "He's an uppity brat—a smear on our people's name—!"

Harald held up a hand. He looked annoyed with Hiccup, but also disbelieving of his claim.

"Your people hunt dragons then, do they not?"

Hiccup started to shake his head, feeling more lucid than he had since before he was stuck down.

"Not anymore," he lied, the words coming to his mouth quickly. "They were being controlled...by a... a queen dragon." Maybe if he mixed truth in it would be more believable. "She forces them to steal food and feed her, they're slaves really..." The Vikings weren't buying it, no face showed any credence. "But once you get them out of the control, they're really great! They can be companions—"

"Bosh," Halvdan sighed from behind him. "A good story though—"

"I was riding him!" Hiccup snapped, trying to turn his head to properly glare at the Viking. "How can you dispute that?"

Harald hummed and smiled, unkind and condescending.

"Th beasts are known to have hypnotic powers under the right conditions. Judging by what we gleaned from the contraption on its tail, we know it uses you to help him fly."

Hiccup would have gripped his hair in frustration if he weren't being held down. That sounded like
something his father would say.

He sneered at Harald, envisioning Stoick's face. "You can travel halfway across the world but you can't quite get away from that ignorance, can you?"

Pain bloomed beneath the softness of his unprotected side as Halvdan struck him with a free fist.

"Watch what you say, ickle savage. You don't want to go and upset the people in charge, now do you?"

"Just...call 'em...as I see 'em..." Hiccup gasped. He felt a shift in weight, like Halvdan was pulling back for another punch to put him in his place.

Toothless started a long, low growl that rumbled until everything around them stilled. The men closest to the dragon took a few steps back; all present were wary, despite the heavy chains and lack of action, waiting for an attack that never came.

Halvdan decided not to hit Hiccup again.

Harald sighed, long suffering, as if the proceedings were taking up more of his time than he preferred.

"Right then," he said. "Back to the matter at hand. I couldn't help but notice that you had some interesting valuables in your possession..."

Hiccup watched as Harald started to walk towards his pack that lay feet away from Toothless, knocked over and carefully rooted through. Goods he had stolen from other thieves were littered about, pretty ceramics, shiny cutlery, the moneybags, the rubies...

"You're quite the wayward thief," Harald commented. It almost sounded like a compliment. He bent down and picked up the plain sack that Hiccup knew had the rubies. He didn't know why he kept saving them; he may have liked having them in his possession, never knowing if he would ever need them.

If things had been different, if he still had hold of them, maybe he could have traded them in exchange for his and Toothless' freedom. He just wanted to get out of there with his dragon; he couldn't bring himself to care about all of his collected items, now gone.

"I'll tell you what...I'll buy the dragon off yeh." Harald must have misinterpreted Hiccup's shock for he then added, "That's right, you can keep one of your gems and I'll let you on your way."

A fury erupted within Hiccup, blistering in his throat like bile.

"You—you can't buy Toothless!" he roared at them. He felt like he was channeling all the indignation Toothless would have felt, had he just a little more energy. Halvdan squeezed the arm around Hiccup's neck, cutting off any more verbalization of his rage.

"This is the chance to leave with something other than your life," Harald slowly explained. He appeared to be on his last string of patience.

"You are not killing him before me!" Hiccup choked out. Harald looked frustrated. Not so much at Hiccup's difficulty, but at his mad reasoning.

"Do you realize what you're sayin'?" Harald asked, shaking his head in incredulity. "This here is a dragon. You were raised to hate his kind, were you not? And now you willingly offer your life for
"E's mad, mad I tell you!" a disembodied voice rose from the crowd. Murmurs of agreement followed.

"He's worth it!" Hiccup struggled further. "More than any human is!"

"Empty words," Harald scoffed, waving it off. "It's easy to play the martyr when you have nothing to lose, isn't it? But to throw human life away for a dragon is practically sacrilege."

"You have no right to talk about being a traitor or blasphemy!" Hiccup yelled, managing to find his voice against Halvdan's arm. "You gave up your religion—your culture—for money! How can you even think to tell me—umph!"

For the third time, Hiccup was struck, accepting another blow to the side of his head. Harald threw the punch himself after four, long and speedy strides; apparently he didn't like having his honor called into question. Hiccup swore he couldn't feel it. Desperation and numbness kept him from making any sound, but blood leaked into his mouth, either from a loosened tooth or an accidental bite to the tongue.

This time Toothless had risen to his forepaws and released a roar similar to those he used to scare off the Adlets—a noise that could chill any creature that valued its life, but only brought warmth to Hiccup. Weapons were drawn again; half of the men scattered, shouting in fright, while the other half descended on the dragon, trying to force down what the chains wouldn't.

Realizing the strange, protective connection between man and beast went both ways, Harald, roughly tore Hiccup from Halvdan's hold and brought his broadsword to the boy's throat.

"Continue to struggle, beast, and I spill his blood!"

It did the trick. Toothless immediately slumped to the ground, unable to support his heavily injured body while decorated with overweight humans. He had made his opinion on Hiccup's treatment known.

Harald threw Hiccup back into Halvdan's arms and re-sheathed his sword. A small moment of contemplation passed over his face, and his eyes darted from Hiccup, to Toothless, to Hiccup's pack.

He nodded resolutely and began to walk with purpose back to the pile of stolen goods. Hiccup watched, confused and wary at first, and then a cold lump began to form in his stomach as Harald bent down and slowly drew Astrid's axe from the mess of clothes and trinkets.

"I will free you from this beast's control," Harald announced as though he were about to commit to a great service. "And then you'll thank me." He fingered the sharp blade of the double-headed axe, admiring the imprint in his glove. "Maybe, if I'm feeling generous, I'll let you join our guard."

In that moment, Hiccup realized that it didn't matter that they left Berk, or travelled through lands of many cultures, or trained day and night for perfect flight. It was happening anyway. Prejudice and hatred had caught up with them and everything he once feared would come to pass despite his every effort.

"Toothless—Toothless do something!" Hiccup cried, throwing caution to the wind. Toothless moved once, he could move again. "Fire! Anything! Just move!"

Harald positioned himself before Toothless' neck and Hiccup knew it would take more than one swing to kill him—they would have to hack and hack, again and again—
"Toothless! Move! You'll die if you don't!"

::Then I die for you!::

It was the first full sentence Toothless managed that day without struggling and it stabbed through Hiccup like the very axe being leveled.

"What? No! Toothless!"

Toothless didn't respond any longer. His eyes didn't open. He was too injured, too tired, to try and get out of this with both of them in tact. One of them was going to live, and it wouldn't be the dragon.

Hiccup's knees felt weak; he started to sag against Halvdan, who now supported Hiccup rather than restrained him.

"Don't," Hiccup gasped, suddenly unable to breathe. "Don't..."

The axe rose.

"Toothless—!"

Harald's chest inflated, a breath to power the drive.

"TOOTHLESS!"

Instinct and terror took over. Hiccup pitched a sharp, precise elbow into the Solar Plexus of the man behind him, and, in a feat of strength borne to men thrice his size, he threw his captor from his body.

His legs pumped, one after the other. All other sound was blotted as heartbreak clouded around his head; he didn't hear the shouts of surprise or the warnings to the executioner. His vision tunneled on Toothless' face—resigned, eyes closed... just as he had been when Hiccup was about to plunge a dagger into his heart.

Too much was set in motion; nothing could be stopped. Not the momentum of the Viking's swing. Not Hiccup.

Hiccup threw himself over Toothless' head, beating the axe to its destination by a hair's breadth.

Searing, unbridled, endless pain tore through his body and mind. An agonized roar assaulted his ears. Then everything went dark.

Chapter End Notes

D:

Sorry for the disgusting amount of angst.

Væringjar: Old Norse for Varangians
I wanted to keep this rated 'T', so I tried to hold back on the swearing while expressing how desperate he felt. It was hard; I kept trying to picture myself in that situation and could only think of the most vulgar terms that would leave my mouth.

Hiccup doesn't *[hate-hate]* Berk or its people; he's just extremely emotional right now. Or dead.

Some of you might be thinking 'dang, that's a lot of OC's she's throwing in there!'. Well guess what? The joke's on you. Halvdan, Bolli and Harald are all history, baby! I may have taken some liberties with the timeline to get them all in at the same time.

Thanks to Fjordmustang for her wonderful insight on Istanbul!

R&R!
Within one of the lodgings stippling the rocky knolls of Berk, protected from the raging storm by thick wooden walls, an aged woman started to full consciousness. She lay there for a moment, listening to her own heartbeat thunder alongside the rapid tempo of raindrops pelting against the side of her hut.

So abrupt was her waking that she spent her first deep breaths trying to grasp why she had suddenly roused in the dead of night. Had she been dreaming?

She glanced, bleary-eyed, around her unlit room. The dried herbs she bundled earlier that day appeared in a pale flash before darkness overcame again.

She realized, just before the delayed roll of thunder rattled her collection of glass heirlooms, that the most likely culprit would be the clamorous tempest that took Berk at eventide.

"Thor must be throwing a tantrum again," she rasped to herself. She closed her eyes, intent on sleeping through the storm, no matter what.

And then she heard it.

"Amma!"

Though muffled from behind the door to her chambers, and dampened by the howls of Orvandil, she recognized the voice as her granddaughter's. The Elder struggled to rise from her bed, her old joints even more disagreeable than usual, endowed by the soggy weather.

Before her socked feet could touch the floor the door opened with a bang. A small, wailing form careened across the room and into her lap.

"Amma!" the little brunette blubbered, snot and tears mixing above her lip. "Amma—A-Amma...I-I—he—"

"Shh, child," she hushed, pulling the girl close to her bosom. "Shh...tell Amma what's wrong. Is it the storm that frightens you?"

The girl shook her head wildly and opened her mouth to answer, but only harsh hiccups emerged, jarring her tiny frame.

"Shh," the elder repeated. "Take a breath... a slow breath. Calm your mind. Like I taught you."
The soon-to-be nine-year-old nodded, and the Elder patiently waited for her shaking form to still; a
gnarled hand pet the thick hair with a practiced pressure meant for soothing. If it was not the storm
that drove her normally fearless grandchild into her arms (and over the child's own mother), then it
could only be "the secret".

A year passed since the Elder first learned of her granddaughter's dreams, and so far she had
convinced the youngster to only confide in her when they happened. It was not often, but it did
happen. And each time the Elder became more and more sure that her grandchild was destined to
take her place as the village Vǫlva.

"It was him," the girl whispered hoarsely and the Elder did not have to ask who this 'him' was; her
legacy only seemed to dream of one man. "He's...he's...he's dead!"

The child shouted the final word, her voice out of control, and broke down sobbing once more.

The Elder stared into the shadowed space overhead, her arms drawing the girl tighter into her heavily
shawled body. She considered all this could imply.

The girl did not find the usual comfort in the warmth of her grandmother's embrace, and started to
explain what she experienced in disjointed sentences.

"They hit him—I saw it—hit him! The axe! They hit him and it went right through—there was blood
and a dragon and I was so scared! It was so loud and they were scared and angry and I felt it! I felt
that!"

"Hush now, love," the Elder instructed, doting and tender in her command. "Dreams are easily
misinterpreted. Look at me." She leaned back as much as her stiff spine would allow and hooked the
side of her finger under her granddaughter's chin, tilting the small face up to meet her gaze. Another
bolt of lightning flickered through the cracks of her shuttered window, granting her a brief view of
wide eyes and shining, trembling cheeks.

"Nothing is final," she spoke quietly, her voice heard through the overhead thunder. "What you saw
was horrible, I believe that, and one as young as you should not have seen it. But nothing is final.
You saw him struck, but you did not see him die. Is very important that you know this."

The girl sniffled loudly and the Elder could feel a heartbeat too large for such a tiny thing battering
against its cage.

"He's not dead?"

"Nay," the Elder pacified, softly. "I do not believe he is. He is nearly as stubborn as you, wouldn't
you agree?"

"And stubborn people don't die," the girl added, a shaky smile upon her formerly pouted mouth.

"Go back to sleep," Elder commanded, stroking the wild brown strands back from the tear-streaked
face. "You will feel better in the morning, you will see."

The child reluctantly pulled away and turned to the door. She stared at the entryway, at the ajar door,
a peak into the darkness leading to the room she shared with her mother. She turned her eyes to her
grandmother's bed—inviting, with warmed blankets and her beloved Amma. Without further thought
on the matter she clambered over the mass of furs and wool and burrowed into a space just fit for her
body.

The Elder raised a faded brow but settled down herself, much slower and with far more physical
strife than her granddaughter seemed to suffer.

"It will be okay?" the Elder heard her granddaughter ask, accompanied by short, short, warm, puffs of air ghosting across her ear. She knew this did not involve asking permission to sleep in her bed.

"Aye. You will see."

Hiccup coughed out a mouthful of dirt, grimacing at the grains clinging to the roof of his mouth.

He was on the ground, belly down. Toothless wasn't under him. Toothless wasn't anywhere near him.

Hiccup lifted his head and glanced around where he could.

No one was there. He was still in the Hippodrome, but it was empty, barren, no spectators, no Væringjar, and no Toothless.

He pushed himself to his feet, easily, using both arms. Nothing registered as weird until he began to brush off his pants using both hands. He froze and, looking down, spent a moment trying to fathom why his arm was suddenly no longer broken.

Then he realized...

"You are determined to kill yourself."

Hiccup understood the situation right before Gudrid spoke, and so, for the first time, he did not react with stupefaction. He turned, calmly, to find the woman sitting in one of the bottom stands, like she were a member of the vanished audience.

"Gudrid..."

"Sit," she said. She sounded tart, as if she struggled to rein in her anger.

Hiccup obeyed and, as he approached, attempted to interpret the odd emotion on her face. She did not look disappointed, thank the gods. He hated seeing that directed at him.

Even so, she certainly did not look happy.

"It is fortunate that I am young—for any older and I would be liable to heart failure trying to watch over you." She said this just as stiffly, watching Hiccup lower himself to the stone bench through narrowed eyes.

"Sorry," he muttered, glancing down at his lap. He found it difficult to settle his nerves and mind. He felt jumpy, like he expected some half-remembered agony to return at any moment, or that he should be in some sort of hurry—experiencing the same rush he suffered only moments ago—when he knew time stood still here. His body was here, but his emotions and sense were taking a while to catch up from the harrowing experience.

"Do not apologize," Gudrid sighed. She tucked back an errant bang. "You cannot help the way you are."
"I take it I made it in time?" he prompted, giving the empty Hippodrome a look around. Now that desperation and fear weren't consuming his every thought, he could finally admire the artful architecture. Dynamic and Greek; a beautiful shield for ugly activities.

Hiccup did not notice Gudrid's ire lessen as she continued to stare at his profile.

"Oh yes," she answered him. "Toothless was not struck down."

A small smile flitted across Hiccup's face, and after everything that happened the pull of muscle felt foreign to him. He did something right, for once. He managed to save his friend, if only for a little while. Maybe his sacrifice gave Toothless the strength to fight back. Or maybe they had killed Toothless anyway, and they would manage to find each other again somewhere in the next world.

While selfish of him to think so, a part of Hiccup was relieved he could go before his best friend. Matters of physical prowess aside, Hiccup knew he would not take the loss of the dragon very well. Especially compared to Toothless should the reverse happen; the dragon seemed to have far more control over his emotions.

This...this he could handle. He felt a calm acceptance of his fate take hold of him. He got them into this mess—unintentional execution sounded all right to him. He even got to see Gudrid one last time.

"So where was I hit?" he finally asked. Nothing hurt on him, so it was hard to pinpoint what took the blow. It could have been his head, his neck, just an arm...

"I would not want to spoil such a surprise upon your waking." Gudrid had turned teasing, but the easygoing nature was lost on Hiccup.

"Wake...wait—what?" He turned in his seat to face her with his full attention. "I'm alive?"

Her lips quirked. "You certainly are. As is Toothless."

"I..." This sounded too good to be true. Surreal. He had an easier time embracing death. "How do you—?"

"I have already spoken to Toothless," she responded to his unfinished question. Hiccup continued to stare at her, brows furrowed, unable to blink. Gudrid held back a giggle at his bewilderment, knowing the energy would be better served in explanation. "When you are both in a state of deep unconsciousness, I can reach him as well. This was the first time I have managed it; it becomes easier as your bond grows deeper. The bridge connecting you two is quite substantial to me now."

"Ah...yeah," Hiccup mumbled, only half listening as he tried to wrap his mind around the concept of both he and Toothless surviving thus far. "The bond of...understanding, right?"

"Blind faith," Gudrid corrected. "But understanding was the string which tied you. Which is one of the reasons why we are here."

"Another bond?" Hiccup ventured. His mind picked up speed, as if some unanimous ruling in his head decided to forgo trying to reason out his survival and instead pay attention to the vördr.

Gudrid nodded, her eyes shining. "Yes. You have created a new bond, you and he. You both proved that you were willing to do so much more than trust one another; you were both ready to die for one another."

Hiccup hummed. He agreed to the truth in the statement but thought it silly to make such a big deal out of it. Sure, trusting a creature formerly considered an enemy was one thing, but willing to die for
a best friend only seemed natural.

"So it just happened?" he asked. "Just now? We get another bond, just like that?"

"Bonds never just happen. They are just realized." Hiccup narrowed his eyes at her words, only half following the cryptic logic. Gudrid huffed, exasperated. "Had you not noticed your personalities bleeding into one another?"

Hiccup shook his head and Gudrid knew she should have expected his characteristic obliviousness to his and Toothless' relationship.

"Your influence over one other is greater than picking up simple habits. What started out as faith turned into sympathy, and sympathy turned into love. You are brothers. Matched beings, molding your souls into one another so that you have become two pieces of a whole."

Hiccup sighed and ran a hand through his hair. Some flighty part of his mind noted how ridiculously long it had gotten.

"Why is it us?" he asked, partly to her and partly in audible musing. "We're not the first to trust someone weird or...or save someone they love. Why are we getting these bonds and...and perks?"

He could hear the words she spoke, he understood them, but none of them sounded new or shocking. None of them sounded worthy of supernatural attention.

He knew all of this, on some level; he already accepted, long ago, that a life without Toothless was no life at all.

Gudrid pulled his hand away from the tangled, auburn strands, and sandwiched it between her small ones. If she aimed for Hiccup's full attention, she failed; he could only stare, bemusedly, at how both her hands could not conceal one of his own, and how soft her skin felt against his rough, bow-calloused digits. He experienced an odd and instant moment of vertigo, where he didn't know what was real.

"Humans do create these bonds...with other humans," Gudrid started to explain, hoping to get Hiccup's attention back to the matter at hand and off their hands. "You would not notice sharing a lifespan or increased understanding with a bond-sharer when you are of the same breed. But those of similar intelligence, separated by species, are far less likely to create bonds with each other."

He met her eyes. "Because they're so different?"

"Too different to relate. Too similar to be trusted. Reason without communication almost always leads to dangerous misunderstandings. You and Toothless looked past similarities and differences, and it was that decision, on both your parts, that led to where you are now."

Hiccup turned his gaze back to their hands, watching, detached, as his fingers curled over her top hand and his thumb gently brushed her skin, more curious than bold. Soft, warm, and more than a dream.

He did not look for a reaction, but she did not take her hand from him so it must have been okay.

He felt the muted sensation of his heart leaping into his throat, and yet—it didn't feel like it was his. He pushed more focus into the conversation.

"So this new bond...we become more like one another?"
"This is where it gets complicated," Gudrid began, sobering. "I spoke with Toothless. The bond you two have forged entails sharing life. Not simply being together, but life itself."

Hiccup moved his lower jaw from side to side as he worked through the concept. "Toothless is going to live ages longer than me. I know this. It's...it's okay, I guess."

Gudrid tightened her hold on his hand and pulled it into her lap. Hiccup looked at her face; a pitiable expression move across her delicate features.

"It is the bond of devotion. You are connected by love. And I do not mean that of a lover or of family. It is almost a love of self, which is rather ironic as it is based on altruistic actions. You can no longer fathom life without one another, and you will disregard your own wellbeing to see him live. And a part of you will always do it for yourself, and your own favor, because you find it more and more difficult to see yourself as separate beings."

"We... we selfishly try to keep the other alive?" Hiccup tried to sum up. It sounded ridiculous, almost insulting, but, at least on Hiccup's part, it sounded true. Unselfishly selfish. Selfishly unselfish. That sounded like love to him.

Gudrid inclined her head, wanting to encourage at his understanding, but still wary of his reception.

"As I said before, you are now two pieces of a whole. Which leads me to... an option, of sorts."

"What kind of option?" Hiccup asked, slow and cautious. In the few times he met her, he never knew Gudrid as one to beat around the bush.

"A bond such as this can shift destiny and fate, those of the same breed grow old together—a shared lifespan. It does not seem out of place or odd. Even between man and beast, it has happened."

Dawning reached Hiccup in a cold wash. "But man and dragon..."

"Exactly."

It wouldn't work, Hiccup realized, for him and Toothless to share such a bond. It did not just defy destiny or fate or whatever life-altering force there was out there—it defied nature.

Before he could work himself into a pit of disappointment, Gudrid moved his captured hand from her lap to her chest, right over her heart. She succeeded in stopping the downward spiral of his thoughts, and almost managed to capture his full attention, but on the way to her face his eyes rested on her clothed bosom. He could feel her heartbeat.

So alive.
"I spoke to Toothless," she repeated again, as though reminding him of something he needed to realize on his own; a very important fact. "This bond will hold for you two as well."

Hiccup narrowed his eyes. He pulled them from the pile of hands to meet her own, slate gaze.

"How?"

And Gudrid decided she had to be blunt about it.

"He will cut his lifespan in half, and yours will lengthen to meet his end. Your aging will slow, his will quicken—Hiccup listen to me," she said sternly. He was shaking his head, his eyes no longer quite focused. He tugged for his hand back, but she would not relinquish it. She needed him to listen.

"No, that's just, he can't—you can't do that to him—"

"Toothless," she announced the name strong and clear, the one word that would get through to him. "It was his idea for you two to grow old, together. He created this plan. He wants to do it."

Hiccup's half-hearted struggles died down as the constant wrenching of his emotions being began to take its toll.

"Toothless said he can't create unknowns," he whispered. Nothing made sense anymore.

Gudrid had that sad smile again, like she was both happy and hurt for them.

"He couldn't. Until he bonded with you."

The oddest part— weirder than finding out he survived a direct axe strike, or that he was bonded to a
dragon in more ways than he ever could with a human, or that he was attracted to some Odin-appointed warden for his soul—was that Gudrid's words slammed him with a baffling upsurge of emotion that caught in his throat like he swallowed a bola-ball.

He wouldn't cry, of course. Not in front of a girl, and not in front of Gudrid—even if she wasn't quite real. So he said nothing for a long while, squinting at their hands, until he was sure he could control his upended emotions.

"This is something that would need your consent, of course," Gudrid cautioned when they were both sure he wouldn't break down. Hiccup wondered why he even bothered to hide anything from someone who knew his soul.

He bit his bottom lip, frustrated with his options, and turned on Gudrid with a new intensity.

"How could I consent to something like that? How could you ever think I would take half of—"


And Hiccup did, because he was too exhausted to continue fighting something he didn't understand. If the roles were reversed, and he knew he would be forced to live hundreds of years without Toothless...then he would gladly shorten his lifespan. It was the quality, not the quantity, which mattered to him.

Somewhere in his mind a callous truth gnawed, demanding to be realized. If Toothless had not bonded with a human, he would not have to give up part of his life.

Perhaps Hiccup's real issue lay in believing Toothless found him to be worth it.

How had it come to this? How had he not realized the magnitude of his dependence on Toothless—not as a protector or provider, but as a companion? As his other half?

"You don't have to decide now," Gudrid said gently, attempting to soothe the aggravation out of him with words. "Think it over, talk with Toothless about it. Confront him, if you must..."

At the reminder that he would see Toothless again, that they were not dead and that their journey was not over, lightened Hiccup's heavy heart to some degree.

"Yeah...okay, yeah...I'll...I'll talk to him."

He would yank on those ear plates until the dragon told him what the Hel he was thinking!

Hiccup brought his other hand to his hair, running his fingernails along his scalp. He and Toothless were okay now, and that's what mattered. He couldn't worry about the far future or when they would die; especially when he was lollygagging in some sort of dream world.

"So...so was that your message? The bond and the—the life-sharing thing?"

"Eager to be rid of me?" she teased.

"I—no—I just—"

"Just want to see Toothless, I know."

"You know too much," he muttered, glancing about the Hippodrome once more. "So what else is there? Not another bond?"
"No, not another bond." She released his hand from her iron hold and he slowly brought it back to rest on his knee. "I told you before, did I not? That the gods had a plan for you?"

Hiccup pursed his lips, showing exactly how he felt on that subject.

"Yeah," he said shortly.

"You are a hero."

Hiccup closed his eyes at the words.

There were heroes who did brave things and were admired by their friends. Then there were Heroes who were bred, and planned, and eventually led into glorious deaths.

Being labeled a 'Hero' by someone working for the gods implied a lot, and not to his favor.

"I'm not quite sure how to feel about that," Hiccup said honestly.

"Thor has taken an interest in you," Gudrid mentioned easily as if they were engaged in casual conversation.

"Thor?" Hiccup scoffed, sparing her a glance from the corner of his eye and then returning to his scrutiny of some graffiti along the spina. "Of every god out there, I would think he'd be the last one to look in my direction. I mean...I'm, I'm...

He wasn't a big, brawny, hammer-swinging Viking, that's for sure.

"You have a cunning that he envies and admires, and a desire to protect mankind regardless of any disadvantage you find yourself at. You are the man who makes his own rules. You are the man who everyone will notice, and no one will forget. And you are the man who will wield Framherja. It has already been decided."

Hiccup had a nice counter argument building in his mind that went to pieces in those last, dissonant sentences. His mouth turned, his nose wrinkled, and he shifted his full attention back to Gudrid.

"Framherja? What—?"

She offered a bow to him. The most beautifully crafted weapon he had ever laid eyes on, of pure gold and powerful allure. It made the Greek architecture of the Hippodrome look like a lean-to in comparison. Trefoil knots, fine and impossibly blended, danced along the curved limbs. A string of gold pulled taught between grooves. An unreal aura illuminated their features with a rich light no flame could ever hope to match.

"What...what is this?" he breathed. The irrational fear of moving too suddenly in its presence overcame him. This was unearthly. This was a weapon not meant to be handled by man.

"This is Framherja—daughter to Mjöllnir, borne from a spark of its strike, forged by the sons of Ivaldi. She is yours to wield."

Mine. Mine?

"Provided you use her to protect mankind," Gudrid continued. "And never against the gods."

Hiccup nodded, numb and almost too intimidated to touch it. Mjöllnir, Thor's hammer. It came from Thor's hammer. This was an instrument from the gods. And it was being offered to him.

His hand reached out, trembling slightly. What if this was a trick? A test that would lead to
unspeakable punishments if he failed?

But before he could retract the fingers wavering so close to its gleaming riser, otherworldly energy sucked his open hand to the solid metal, forcing his fingers to curl and mold against the golden limb.

Hiccup did not notice Gudrid completely release it to him, or how he brought it closer to his person in careful movements. He could only focus on how *perfectly* it fit into his grasp and how impossibly weightless a weapon of solid gold could be. It hummed against his palm, warm and alive.

Alive like Gudrid's heartbeat.

Hiccup felt an immediate, and unexpected connection. He felt less alone. Able to see, to realize, that other worlds beyond this life were only a step away if the direction was only pointed out.

He couldn't hear how heavy his breathing became as his body and mind fixated on only this weapon. Framherja.

"I...I don't..."

"It will be your duty to learn her power, to bring her to her full potential. Let her bring you to yours," Gudrid explained, smiling at his naked awe. "But I remind you: she is for the protection of mankind only. Not to be wielded against the gods. Humans are rarely granted this favor. Do you understand?"

"Yes. But, I still don't..." He didn't know *why*. Why was he getting this? Was it because of his and Toothless' bond? Did he entertain the gods that much? Or was he the sort of hero he feared Gudrid implied him as...the one being herded to a glorified end?

He settled the weapon across his legs, his hands unable to keep themselves from tracing the designs, his eyes unable to tear away from its ethereal glow.

"What am I supposed to do?" he half whispered. "How can I use this if it's here? When I wake up —"

"She will be right besides you," Gudrid assured him. "As will Toothless. Hiccup, it will be okay. This is just a gift. You will figure it out in your own time, as you have been doing."

With great strength of will, Hiccup managed to pull his stare from bow and refocused back on her. He found the force of his voice once more.

"Excuse me if I have a hard time believing that." Not only would he most likely wake up back in the custody of the Væringjar, but he and Toothless would probably be too injured to fight back.

She reached over and squeezed his hand.

"You must trust me. Everything will be okay."

The heat from her hand matched that of the bow, both seeping into his skin, both speaking of life.

"You're not even real," he pointed out, softly. And neither was anything in this world. This was just a dream.

Gudrid's eyes had gone overly wide. "Oh no. No. Is that what you think?" She smiled, full of pity and bemusement. "I live and breathe and dance and eat, just like you. You see... I am sleeping too."

Hiccup would have pulled away from her if he didn't have an irrational urge not to disturb the weapon on his lap. He opted for bearing her close presence and instead focused on trying to figure
out what was going on.

Again.

"You're sleeping? You're real?" Her nod did nothing to calm. "I thought...I thought you were a ghost or something!"

She kissed him! She was holding his hand—he stroked her hand. Granted, he jumped to a lot of conclusions with her, but he never expected...

"Sometimes," she conceded. "Sometimes us völdr have already lived our lives on Midgard by the time we are assigned to a soul, and sometimes halfway through that existence. And sometimes from the very beginning. We are humans who were touched by the gods since birth, soothsayers or priests, but this duty can be assigned to our soul at any time. The place where we meet now is called Hugrvöllr; it is a plane separate from Midgard, where a warden can converse with her ward no matter where in the world, no matter which world. This is a touchstone for me, something I just learned recently; the ability to shape the setting of Hugrvöllr and bring forth your soul."

Hiccup listened silently and attentively up until that point.

"And you chose...the Hippodrome?" She chose the place where he was just "executed" for a chat?

Gudrid bobbed a shoulder in a rueful shrug.

"It is easier and faster to pull from our ward's freshest memories," she explained, and then correctly interpreted the reason for Hiccup's subsequent horrified expression. "I can't hear your deepest thoughts or desires, Hiccup. But our souls are connected and I can... glean, I suppose, your foremost attentions or subjects that weigh heavily enough on your mind that it affects your behavior. Or I simply see your recent surroundings in a vision."

"Oh," Hiccup muttered, breathing a little easier but not much. Framherja thrummed atop his thighs, quelling any lingering discomfort.

"I myself learned of my duty at a very young age," Gudrid went on, "receiving all sorts of dreams and omens, and eventually was trained to interpret them correctly. I practically watched your life through my nightly visions."

"What... exactly did you see?" Hiccup asked, still moderately apprehensive.

She laughed, glad to see more of his self-conscious, but easygoing, personality return following the recent traumatic experience. He had been on edge since he first "woke", and rightly so.

"Only what the gods wanted me to see," she assured him, as if the gods would never show her anything inappropriate. Needless to say, Hiccup wasn't whole-heartedly assured. "Just to get a feel for your character at first. Sometimes things came to me out of order—dreams of your most ghastly choices, things I found impossible to believe to be true. It took years to piece together the chain of the events I was given, the reasons for your actions, the type of man you were and would become. The gods are cryptic with me too, you know."

Hiccup thought back to something she mentioned before, somewhat amazed he had been paying attention at all given the state of his mind. "You said you were assigned...they chose you to be my völdr on purpose?"

Gudrid nodded, taking his hand in two of her own again, looking happier as Hiccup relaxed into his familiar, inquisitive persona.
"Vördrs are chosen through connection," she said. "Sometimes it has to do with matching characters, others, like I feel is our situation, has to do with similar backgrounds. A vördr and ward must be able to connect on some intimate level and have it grow from there.

"We, for example, are both from Berk."

A silence lapsed after that, in which Hiccup continued to process everything he was told until that last bit. He rolled it over in his head a few times, making sure he did not mishear.

"You are from Berk?" He needed confirmation. He could not recall ever seeing anyone like her before. Perhaps she moved while he was young and his memory had not managed to imprint such a face?

"I am."

Hiccup smiled, his heart thundering.

"So...we can meet out of here? In real life?" If he could find her outside of his dreams—or Hugrvöllr—he could...well...

While she wasn't the first girl he had been attracted to, she was the first to show him any affection. Or give him attentions he was interested in returning.

Maybe he was just desperate to increase human companionship, but the thought that he could find her in Midgard made him feel childishly giddy.

For the first time that he could remember, Gudrid looked at him with an open, wretched grief. He got the impression that what he said, and what he thought, were things she wanted to happen so much more than he could ever realize.

"I fear we live in separate times," she uttered.

Hiccup cocked his head. "How so? What do you mean?"

Gudrid bit her lip, gripping his hand as though to keep him right in front of her.

"You see... I have not once left Berk. Never in my life. I have looked for you, since my first dreams as a girl when I wasn't sure if you were real or not. I waited. I still hope to see you one day but... I fear we've missed each other somehow. Like ships passing on either side of a narrow island." She paused to wet her lips and take a breath. "There is a great possibility that I am already dead, or you are already dead, and we only meet at this time because this is how the gods chose it to be."

"Wh-what? You're saying... we're not from the same time...?" Hiccup murmured, starting to come to terms with the notion.

Gudrid's grip on his hand tightened. "As I said. I've spent my entire life in Berk. You were not there."

"Yeah, I would have remembered you," Hiccup admitted, the words came out flirtier than he meant even as he felt the same pang of loss as she.

Astrid was pretty like Gudrid, Ruffnut wasn't bad either, but there weren't too many older girls that caught his attention. Not like Gudrid did.

"So your soul watches my life in dreams—the important parts, anyway—and now you're just here to
guide me?” he gathered, his voice soft. This would be the extent of their relationship, and though wholly disappointed, he would manage to accept this.

Something told him Gudrid had a more difficult time with the matter.

She played with his fingers, rubbing their very different palms against each other, nothing but longing directed at his hand.

"I've been watching your life since I was a little girl...bits and pieces...more and more in the correct sequence since you left Berk, pulling me to you enough times for me to finally be able to manage a Hugrvoøllr meeting. But I am not sure how much longer I will get these visions."

"They could stop?" Now Hiccup thought he could understand the aura of heartache she extended to him. He at least wanted to see her in this plane of existence. If nothing else, if he could never touch her real body, he wanted to reach her on some level. This felt real enough for him. He would offer no complaints. Why would it have to be taken?

"I am still expected to marry," Gudrid said, and a moment of contempt shifted her features before vanishing. She continued to concentrate on their hands, speaking to the tangle of fingers rather than to him. "It's going to happen some day. Soon, I would imagine. They are just rumors, of course, but some women lose their powers...afterwards."

Hiccup's eyebrows rose. He had heard such stories as well; that only virgins had the ability to receive messages from the gods. Before now, he had no opinion on the matter and no reason to contemplate its validity, for he assumed such tripe would never matter to him.

Now it mattered a great deal.

"I have watched you grow," Gudrid repeated for what could have been the fifth time. "Can you fault me for falling in love with you?"

Hiccup jerked. He gaped at the woman, who kept her attention on their united hands. The words stung him. He hadn't heard the word love directed at him in...

Gudrid lifted her face, her jaw clenched in determination and sorrow, her eyes moments away from watering.

"Kiss me."

Hiccup was beyond overthinking things, or breaking down reasoning. His inquiry had burned out; he could no longer puzzle over lifespans or time or heroes.

He finally managed to set aside Framherja, relinquishing the heat in his palm and replacing it with the sides of Gudrid's soft face. He drew her closer, breathing in her scent.

And then he kissed her as he dreamed of kissing her, in dreams formerly unknown to Hugrvoøllr.

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For the love of Odin's sacrificial eye, he hurt.

Hiccup suppressed the urge to arch his back and whimper as muscles he did not know he had
constricted into painful spasms.

He lay on his stomach, much as he had when he awoke in Hugr Höllr. But instead of inhaling dirt straight off of the Hippodrome's grounds, it was cloths smelling of peppermint and medicines beneath his chin.

Hiccup extended his senses. He was on a bed, at the very edge of one so that his left arm—possibly set and wrapped in a sling—could escape the weight of his body. And this time, instead of being alone, he felt the distinguished heat belonging only to his Night Fury pressed to his right side.

With great pains, Hiccup turned his head to face the dragon curled atop the covers. Before he could even think to utter Toothless' name, or bring the sight of great beast into focus, a large, slippery tongue sponged up the side of his face, catching the corner of his mouth and slicking his hair at a absurd angle.

"Ugh," he groaned as his first sound through a parched throat.

::You're alive! You're okay!::

Something was thumping against the bed, sending painful jolts along his body, and Hiccup knew Toothless' tail was enraptured in a joyful beat.

"Tooth...stop..."

The tongue came back again, and again.

::You can't stop me::: The dragon sound so elated, so much more energized than the last time Hiccup had seen him, that Hiccup could only manage a half-hearted glare at being taken advantage of in such a helpless state.

He made one small move to escape the wet appendage-then ceased all struggles as another grunt of pain escaped with his breath. The axe had struck him in the back. He knew this now. Right in the center, between his shoulder blades. Across his spine.

He should be dead.

"Tooth..." Hiccup murmured between licks, not wanting to get fishy-saliva in his mouth. His voice was half-muffled in the flat pillow. "We need to talk."

About sharing a lifespan, about Gudrid, about why they were still alive. Toothless did stop his unduly affectionate licking, but not to respond. Hiccup's limited vision only allowed him to see a dark, scaled chest puff out as the dragon stretched his neck upward to attention.

"Yes," a familiar voice spoke from the other side of the room, well out of Hiccup's vision, "we do."

Chapter End Notes

*Art by Artydesk

I did warn about mystical stuffs going on. It's happening.
Vocab:

Orvandil = Norse god of storms (more so the wind element of it, as opposed to Thor's role)

Vǫlva = Priestess.

***Gyðja, or Gothi as many fics and HTTYD itself have used, is incorrect in Viking culture. That would actually be Stoick.

Fjordmustang helped me with hashing out Hiccup's weapon's name. Thank you!

R&R!
Idolized

Chapter Summary

Recovery is a bitch. At least Toothless is a cat deity.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Idolized

Those unexpected words iced over Hiccup until even the shallow motions of his lungs ceased. The loss of activity did not lesson his pain, but neither did it augment, so he took the moment to entertain the likelihood of suffering delusions or hallucinations brought on by this state.

"Toothless..." he murmured softly into the pillow. Toothless wasn't freaking out, so he shouldn't freaking out. Right?

Frankly speaking, Hiccup did not have the energy to freak out. But the knowledge that under any other circumstance he would be freaking out kept him highly agitated.

::We're fine:: Toothless assured, and Hiccup believed him.

Slowly, miserably, Hiccup turned his head back to his left side, where his arm dangled and where the man who put him in such a state lingered in the doorway. Hiccup clamped down on the urge to push off the bed, scramble back, escape in any manner. Not only was he physically incapable of it at the moment, but Toothless' calm reception of the man placated him. For now.

Tall, dashing, and the epitome of Viking, Harald of the Væringjar strode into the room with annoying confidence. The strong steps lost much of their mettle when a faint, but distinctly warning, growl rumbled from Toothless' chest. It sent sent warm and reassuring vibrations into Hiccup's shoulder.

Harald chose the closest seating option Toothless approved of in a smooth, image-saving move—a cushioned bench stationed against the wall.

Hiccup followed the man's every move with the most active part of his body—unblinking, unforgiving, eyes. His back spit fire up and down his spine, his arm continued to throb, the skin beneath the cloth sling itched, and he could hardly breathe he was so thirsty—but the bulk of his attention stayed with the menacing man. The Viking was unarmed, non aggressive, and completely untrustworthy.

Harald gazed back at Hiccup with such a different expression from the glare he wore last, that the bedridden boy had to wonder if he'd memorized the face correctly at all. It was a reserved and curious aura that exuded from the older man, one that told of subdued interest and colored by the smallest traces of fascination. Hiccup held the stare for a long while, trying to make sense of why this man stood before him as a reluctant host would before an unexpected guest, and not as a warden before a prisoner.

Within his unmoving body, Hiccup's mind raced: stumbling over a thousand things he wanted to say,
a thousand things he wanted to do—too many and too fast for Hiccup to fully understand a single one of them.

He managed to croak out the most notable and repeated word that came to mind.

"Why...?"

With their odd staring match apparently finished, Harald leaned back, exuding a sort of bluster that Hiccup didn't know was possible to achieve while sitting.

"Why are you still alive?" Harald repeated aloud, managing a neutral tone that only served to further draw out Hiccup's curiosity. "Or why haven't I killed you after you failed to die properly?"

"...Uh..."

"Because I can only answer the latter."

Hiccup swallowed with that painfully dry throat, and nodded as best he could without aggravating his spine; side-to-side motions were apparently better received than up and down ones. Good to know. He would have preferred some sort of liquid to an explanation at the moment, but he couldn't bring himself to make the demand. Even with the unwilling appreciation Hiccup felt for the man's willing frankness, he would not trust anything given to him by Harald.

"A number of reasons," Harald continued, "I'll admit I was impressed by your actions. Didn't expect that, that's for sure. I suppose, when push came to shove, you really were looking out for it. That and the beast, whats-his-face, gone and went berserk right after."

Hiccup's lip twitched. He wouldn't have expected anything less from his over-protective minder.

::I might have bit a few people::: Toothless admitted quietly.

"Kill anyone?" Hiccup got out, and since it was unclear to whom it was directed, he received two answers.

"No, amazingly."

::I had other priorities than chasing down scale-less vermin::: Toothless' answer was accompanied by a soft nuzzle to the back of Hiccup's head. The dragon didn't like thinking about the most horrific sight he had ever been subjected to in all his years; he would rather serve under the demon again before looking upon Hiccup in such a broken state.

"But..." Harald began, wonder tingeing his speech, "You're alive. You shouldn't be alive."

Hiccup knew this and only gave a slow blink to show his agreement.

"You were alive after I struck you. Axe in the back and you were still breathing. Never seen anything like it."

Hiccup grunted in a more forceful response, noncommittal and impatient. He knew this.

"Nay, you don't understand—" Harald couldn't seem to get off the topic now that he was speaking to the miracle itself. "The healer said your spine was cut right in half—and that part's not surprising, considering my strength—" He stopped upon spotting the matching, stony expressions on the faces of his audience, and then cleared his throat. "Right, well, you get my point. You were still breathing and that was shocking, all right. And the healer said you're healing at a remarkable rate." Hiccup felt
anything but healing. He felt like he was still dying. "But then this appeared."

Harald gestured to something well out of Hiccup's sight, on the floor or propped against the wall. He couldn't see over the edge of the bed, nor could he move his body to be able to. But he could sense it. Warm and alive and faintly glowing as he knew it could.

"Framherja..." Hiccup breathed, rough and raw. His throat tickled at the use, used one too many times in its condition, and he let out a series of pain-wracked coughs. Each involuntary, lobbing tremor of his ribs felt like burning coals scraping along his back and by the time he got himself under control he was wincing in to the pillow.

::Hiccup::

Toothless moaned, somehow understanding how much the simple action hurt the human. The dragon gently laid its head atop Hiccup's shoulders to help stabilize him without causing more injury.

::Hold on::

Rather than putting effort into responding, Hiccup squinted in the direction where Framherja rested and absorbed the fact that she was there. Despite how impossibly uncomfortable he was, Hiccup still felt relief at her presence. Gudrid, the gods, it was real.

"That...thing just appeared," Harald repeated, his voice hushed yet carrying cleanly across the room, "in a bolt of lightning. Before we could finish you off or kill your beast...the...the sky darkened. Lightning struck between us and the both of you, and in its place was that bow. We knew then, something wasn't right..." He gazed at the weapon as he spoke, awe and fear open in his expression. "We tried to pick it up—but it caused us great pain to do so." He gave a wry, unfelt smile and held up a scarred hand. "Your monster could touch it, so he brought it here."

::Scared some respect into them::

Toothless informed Hiccup, cheery at the impression. ::We've come to an agreement since then. Sort of. It mostly involved them healing you and me doing what I wanted::

"So great at negotiating," Hiccup exhaled. The words were rushed into one breath and were so softly spoken that it came off as a very long sigh to Harald.

It was then—as Hiccup began to accept the circumstantial recovery time and started relaxing into the idea of healing under enemy watch—that the most bizarre, out-of-place incident occurred.

A cat, white and longhaired, slinked into the room. It first rubbed against Harald's leg, back arching in a smooth wave and topped by a raised tail. Harald ignored the cat as though this was perfectly normal, and the cat soon lost interest, deciding next to pussyfoot its way to the bed. Hiccup followed it with his eyes as best he could; it left his sight for only an instant and then it reappeared in a sudden hop atop the bed. Hiccup felt it carry itself over his legs, crossing his body as if he were nothing more than a doormat.

He would have said something despite the pain, if he could figure out the right words. His mind had unexpectedly blanked.

"We decided to fix you up and get a right explanation out of you. Didn't want to do nothin' that would get us damned for eternity."

Hiccup blinked slowly. After spending a moment wondering if he was the only one who had seen the cat, Hiccup found Harald's continuation of his story rather sudden. He took a moment to think on what the man just said, trying to pull his mind back into the mostly one-sided conversation.

One thing struck him as odd.
"You don't...gods..." He didn't want to speak too much; he didn't want to start coughing again.

Thankfully, Harald seemed to understand what he tried to say. It was no secret, after all, that those who swear their loyalty to another as powerful as an emperor often converted to the local religion as well. The Væringjar were no exception.

"I can swear to a new God, lad, but I can't change what I was raised to believe in. Nor what I was raised to fear. I myself have no intention of instigating the wrath of the gods, and neither do my men. There's no such thing as chance when the elements intervene with a kill...and that—what happened in the 'Drome—was Thor's symbol as clear as day. We're not near as brainless as you seemed to believe we are."

Hiccup would have loved to argue that, had he the energy or care to. He recognized that Harald took advantage of the fact that he didn't have his sharp tongue to defend himself, and it irked Hiccup to no end.

"That's what bought you some time to live, anyway. You and the beast. But then the Empress went and granted you immunity. We're not to harm either of you, no matter what you say about that bow."

By now, the heaviness and confusion from waking up after a deep slumber had lifted from Hiccup's awareness, and he narrowed his eyes at the Viking, trying to express without words that he wanted to know why the Empress suddenly wanted them safe. After she apparently had no qualms about shooting them out of the sky.

He kept his incredulity that the Byzantine Empire was run by a woman to himself.

Harald snorted, as though his personal thoughts on the matter were less than kind, and gestured curtly to Toothless.

"Because of him."

"Too-tooth..." Gods he needed water. He wouldn't be surprised if his throat started bleeding from the effort it took to talk. He wanted to turn his head and face the dragon again, but he was still unwilling to allow Harald out of his sight.

The last time he had his back to the man he ended up with an axe in it.

As if discovering Hiccup's plight, Toothless laid his head on Hiccup's pillow, right behind the boy's, and purred. Warm breath cradled the back of Hiccup's neck like a caring hand.

::Hiccup, they're wonderful!::

Toothless sounded so dreamy, so happy—he sounded as a human would sound when preoccupied by woolgathering—and Hiccup's confusion reached an all time high. Who were they? Why were they wonderful? And why was Toothless acting like the man who hurt them both was nothing more than a decorative tapestry?

Harald shifted, catching Hiccup's attention once more as he leaned further back in his seat to rest his head against the wall. The man went on, speech directed to the ceiling.

"It was a political maneuver, and, undoubtedly, not her idea alone. The people of this land are highly...eh, superstitious when it comes to cats. The damn rodents are everywhere—revered, even. Some of me men fall ill when encountered by them, but nothing will be done to remove them. They're in homes, the streets, doing as they please. God forbid you kick one..." Harald had a very unpleasant expression on his face, possibly remembering a specific incident that entailed retribution.
on the kicked cat’s behalf. ”...'N, oddly enough, they’re particularly fond of that giant, hairless rat you call a dragon."

Some things started to click into place for Hiccup. Not all, but enough that his attention could stray to the thought of cats without his immediate safety taking up brainpower. And now that 'cats' were on his mind his eyes were drawn to areas within his vision that had them. There was a cat sleeping under a table by the door. Another one high up on a wooden chest, surveying the lot of them. Two more curled underneath the bench opposite from Harald. He didn't want to think of how many were behind him.

Harald seemed to follow Hiccup's line of thoughts.

"The ickle beasts started to come in here within a day of your tending, crawling all over him, and word got out fast of the phenomenon. Your dragon has become something of a relic to the people. Apparently, what the cats like, the people like. 'N' the Empress likes the people to like her...so...immunity."

Hiccup was alive because Thor liked him, there was some higher power guiding him to a destiny, and he had begun to create a bond with a dragon that gave him benefits—possibly consequences—he could only speculate about.

He was also alive because of cats—the one reason he had the most trouble accepting.

Harald stood, putting Hiccup on edge again and halting his attempt to make sense of the information overload.

"I was instructed to inform the Empress of your waking. When your have recovered some, we'll see what you can do with that bow. I'm curious to see what's so special about you."

Hiccup wanted to yell at him, irrationally, as there were no specific words that came to mind. All he knew was that this man hurt him, hurt Toothless, and was yet making more demands.

Nothing came from his mouth, however. He simply glowered at the Viking, who met the stare with a hard look of his own before turning. Harald's body jerked with half a departing step before he paused. He looked back at Hiccup, down on Hiccup, his expression unreadable.

"I won't apologize for this," he said quietly, not bothering to gesture as the entire sight before him would fall under 'this'. "I don't apologize for things I'm not sorry for. But I will take responsibility."

With his piece said, Harald left with a flourish of his cape and the fading clinks of his armor, and Hiccup with a peaceful opportunity to ponder what he meant.

He didn't take it. Instead, Hiccup turned his head to face Toothless, as he had wanted to do countless times. His perturbing distraction was gone and now the unyielding throb of his injuries bobbed back up to his attention. Hiccup grimaced at how immensely uncomfortable he was, and took another moment to breathe some control back into his pain management: trying to trick his mind into letting go of the mad urge to itch and cradle his arm, or fight down the psychotic need to curl his spine, or attempt to ignore the feeling of wooden splinters sliding down his throat with each dry swallow.

Hiccup wrinkled his nose. His long hair, oiled thick with his own, saturated sent, matted beneath his face from his repeated head turning, sodden with dirt and blood. Still, his need for a bath was quite low on his mental priority list.

He blinked Toothless back into focus, swallowing a couple more times, feeling like his throat was sticking closed with each attempt.
Before Hiccup could see Toothless, however, he saw the cat that climbed over him earlier. It lay nestled between the dragon's forepaws, warm against the dark chest, purring and staring coolly at him.

Hiccup squashed down a ludicrous pang of possessiveness.

He felt his pillow depress under a carefully controlled weight moving overhead and watched Toothless nuzzle the head a new cat. Though they made for a rather cute sight, Hiccup continued to struggle with understanding how this all worked out.

"How...many?"

*How many were there?*

::*Right now? Only a dozen or so. They like to lie in the sun. There will be more tonight::*

Oh gods.

::*They've been bringing me food. Entire fishes. They're warm and beautiful. They use their fur perfectly, completely sensible, unlike you silly humans. And they're respectful::*

*To you,* Hiccup wanted to argue, *they just walked all over me.* He was still too fearful of driving himself into another bout of coughing to say as much.

"We need to talk," Hiccup instead rasped, not wanting Toothless to forget this.

Toothless stretched his neck over the cat lying at his chest and rested his head back on Hiccup's pillow. His large, green eyes met Hiccup's in a sad way.

::*You need to get better first::*

"You...?"

::*I'm healing fine. I'll be walking again soon::*

"Fast."
"No. I heal at a reasonable rate. You take forever."

"How long...was I out?"

"A few days. They said you may not wake for weeks."

"They?"

"The healer, two women of royalty, and that leader of the Vikings. They are the only ones I allow in here."

And the cats, Hiccup added silently. Still, that Harald got so close to them did not sit well with Hiccup.

"You...allow him?"

He did this to them. He put them through this!

Toothless moaned, forlorn, and gave his human's forehead a few gentle licks.

Usually disgusted with being licked, this time Hiccup felt an odd comfort from the lingering warmth, and his mind calmed some.

"There were worse options. He's the leader of the warriors, so intimidating him will work to our advantage. Toothless settled his head back on the pillow, pinning his human with a stern, but tender stare. Listen to me, Hiccup. I don't like him, and I will never forgive him for what he did to you, but he, at least, can be reasoned with. They took my tail fin and we are not going anywhere for a long time with you in that condition. It will still be dangerous, but we have to stay to heal."

Hiccup gave a tired blink and a barely perceivable nod. He just woke up, how was he this exhausted? Maybe his mind just needed some assurance that they were safe—or as safe as they could be provided the circumstances...

His body didn't feel any more healed the second time Hiccup woke up; he still felt trapped and stiff and burning and cold all at once. But his bearings came to him a little faster, which meant his mind was better rested.

The lighting had changed in the room; the shadows of furniture had shifted and the fire of glims saturated every wall color in a deeper hue. Even with no windows within Hiccup's sight, he knew it had to be nearly evening—though of the same day, he did not know. He cared more about the person standing by a wall table more than the time—a person who was short and rather stocky for such a height, but, thankfully, too slight to be anyone of Viking descent.

A low croon sounded from behind him, Hiccup felt Toothless adjust, and the body in his vision turned at the signal, the face highlighted by a long candle at hand.

An elderly man, fifty at the youngest, dressed in layers of robes and busy with wrapping up a bundle of soiled bandages. Hiccup realized this must have been the healer, and he must have just gotten fresh bandages.
The healer first looked at Toothless, questioning the grab for his attention, and then dropped his gaze
to Hiccup, where, upon finding the boy alert and watching him, smiled.

"Ah, Βλέπω σηκώθηκες?" he asked in what Hiccup had to assume was Greek. He sounded kind and
reserved and, for all Hiccup knew, could have just threatened his life.

"Water," Hiccup rasped, closing his eyes again at the threatening tickle that sometimes preceded
coughs. He needed something to drink and he'd trust something given to him by a healer over a
Viking any day.

"κρατάω πάνω εκεί, νέος ενα." Hiccup opened his eyes at the very close voice and was surprised to find the man kneeling by his
bed, already holding out a cup. He didn't need any further prompting. Though it hurt to extend his
neck away from the pillow and even the motions of his throat caused him pain, Hiccup found every
shock for moving worth it as he drank messily and greedily until he was satisfied.

He gave the healer a wet smile when he finished and got one in return (though with less drool). The
man set the cup down next to a ceramic pitcher Hiccup had not noticed before.

"Don't speak Norse?" Hiccup asked, rubbing his face as best he could into the mattress to wipe off
excess water.

"He does not. Only-eh Greek, and little English."

A new voice.

Hiccup wished he could move; he wished for his focus and motility back so he would not have to be
subjected to disembodied voices anymore. Thankfully, he didn't have to wait long for an identity to
be made.

"I, however, do speak-eh the Norse."

A woman stepped from the void of hallway shadows bayed just beyond the entryway, dressed in
layered, embellished robes of purples, blues and golds. A headdress of rolled cloth consumed her
hair, exposing her thin, smooth neck. Jewelry that would surely sink her faster than a statue thrown to Ægir covered her neck like armor.

She was beautiful. The most beautiful old woman Hiccup had ever seen.

::That's the 'Empress': Toothless needlessly informed him. Hiccup could hear overlaying purrs
going on behind him and chose not to speculate on how many cats were on the bed with him. He
couldn't seem to share his attention with anything else but the Empress.

"Hi," Hiccup greeted with an unanticipated sensation of stupidity tagging along with the word. It
must be something about women. He could shout at Vikings and taunt thugs, but a woman—any
kind of woman—made his head feel cottony. And the more attractive they were, the more foolish he
felt.

His own rank scent, speculated appearance, and guttural voice all came to his attention at once, and
Hiccup actually found it difficult to continue to meet her eyes. It felt like ages since he experienced
this sort of self-consciousness; he didn't like it.

"Hello," the Empress returned kindly. She gave a courteous nod to Toothless and returned her focus
to the bandaged boy. "My-eh name is Zoe, I am Empress of Byzantium. This is Iason, my own
healer I have put on you. I have many apologies for what happened to you, and it will be made right. You are now guest of my kingdom."

She spoke well for someone who obviously learned Norse later in life. Hiccup certainly would not fault her for the miswording; he was grateful for the communication bridge.

"My name is Hiccup," he returned with as much control over his speech as possible. "He is Toothless."

He made an unconscious gesture with his left arm. He only managed to move his shoulder up, causing the appendage to swing lightly, before a sharp pain and a harsh wince told of his mistake.

The healer—Iason—bustled forward, clicking his tongue at Hiccup for the foolish move.

::Hello, your grace:: Toothless said in a startling imitation of a human greeting. Hiccup had a hard time telling if it were genuine or sarcastic; either way he had a feeling the dragon bowed his head in a partnered gesture.

"Ah, Toothless," the Empress spoke, her smile widening as she appeared charmed by both the dragon and his name. "A name, at last."

Hiccup knew she was older than she appeared; something in her voice, smooth as it was, told him so, and the lines of her face lingered just long enough after each expression to the years. And though covered, he would bet his useless, left arm that grey colored her hair.

Still, something also told him that she aged extraordinarily well, and any year he guessed for her would be far off its mark.

"Urh—!" Hiccup's shameless admiration of the Empress (which went unnoticed due to her admiration of Toothless) was rudely cut short by a sharp movement of his elbow by the healer. He couldn't contain the aggrieved snarl at the man, who appeared oblivious to Hiccup's start as he fiddled with the broken appendage.

"You speak English, yes?" Hiccup asked, staring hard at the healer.

The man recoiled, startled at being addressed by his patient in terms he understood.

"Vah! Eh—little. Yes."

"Ton't do zat again."

Iason looked, first, bewildered at the commanding tone, then chagrined as the meaning came to him. He muttered something unkind in his native tongue and stood, moving down the bed to Hiccup's lower half.

::You are feeling much better, I take it?:: Toothless asked, pleased at the greatly missed ferocity behind Hiccup's words. Hiccup hummed.

"Not really but—guh!" Something had sharply pinched his calf through the sheets and Hiccup glanced down to see the healer gazing back at him, completely unapologetic. "What did I just tell you?"

"Brat," Iason returned. It could have been one of ten words he knew in English, but he seemed confident in its application.
The Empress' laughter stole Hiccup's attention before he lay into the man with renewed energy. She seemed to relax more with each passing moment spent in the room.

"Iason is-eh quite good at his arts, I promise you," she told her guest. She then spoke some words to Iason in Greek. The man responded in kind and, after their brief conversation that involved much submissive nodding on his part, gathered up his medical supplies to leave.

He cast Hiccup a flat, warning stare just before he exited, and the message was clearly received: *I'll be back and you won't tell me how to do my job.*

"He has-eh only good things to say. You heal as never seen before. You could have ability to move the back in one more week. You feel pain in the legs, so you can use them again soon too. This is all very good and impressive."

Hiccup was too enraptured by her presence to tell her that he could feel pain *everywhere* and he thought none of it good or impressive.

"Where am I?" he asked instead.

"This is guest quarters in Hippodrome. It is closest and best place to treat you after *it* happened. When you are-eh better, you and Toothless will move to better place. We first thought you would be carried when safe, but now it is-eh thought that you will bring yourself there when you are ready. How is it you heal like this?"

Before answering, Hiccup took a breath to test the expansion of his lungs and to try and gauge how long it would be until he could move. He repressed the flinch that came when they only got half as full as he wanted. It was still better than the last time he was awake, where he could hardly move his shoulders.

"It's because I'm his rider," he told her. He knew that she would understand that 'he' referred to Toothless. The Empress seemed obsessed with the dragon and naturally took the cue to return to admiring the Night Fury. Hiccup didn't need to see Toothless to know the dragon basked in the attention from the Empress and the cats.

But he had to wonder...

"Why do you..." he cleared his throat that started to clog again with phlegm. His body still felt hot and his head a little cloudy and he offhandedly wondered if he were feverish at one point. It would explain why he felt stiff *everywhere.* "Why are you not afraid of Toothless. After we were shot down...didn't it happen because you thought we were dangerous?"

It was the most neutral terms he could come up with. He still felt angry and misjudged and mistreated. He still wanted someone other than he and Toothless to suffer for what happened, and he was hoping it would be Harald.

"The-eh guard that my uncle collected shot you down," she immediately corrected, as if she wanted no part in taking responsibility for their plight and Hiccup knew she spoke of the Væringjar. "They are entrusted with keeping city safe and have very little limits on how to do so. As for me, I-eh had heard of dragons before, but I had never encountered one. Growing up, I hear stories of good dragons and bad dragons. As you can imagine, we get new citizens from all over world. I hear good things from some people, and bad things from others—such as the-eh guard. But you are first to show me a dragon, and how dragon and human can behave. I feel, you have the-eh best argument so far. And that the cats love him so also tells me much."
This is a smart, smart woman, Hiccup. Toothless crooned, loud and cute to attract an admiring sigh from the Empress. It is a pity she is no longer capable of carrying children.

Hiccup could move his right arm enough to flick Toothless in the leg (or what he thought was his leg).

"We will try to make you as comfortable as we can," Zoe assured him. But when she spoke, she looked at Toothless, and Hiccup felt an indistinct pang of annoyance at one of the two. "We will clean you and move you to better quarters as soon as possible."

Hiccup gave her a slight nod—though, at this point, he wasn't sure if she addressed him or Toothless. Personally, he didn't mind where they recovered; this was a bed, they had a roof overhead, and both were more than he was accustomed to.

Zoe gave a cordial nod to the two males and took a step backwards.

"I will leave you to your rest now. Iason will return later."

As she started to leave, Hiccup realized a growing ache for more water and began to regret the absence of Iason. He didn't mind slurping from a cup provided by a healer, but he wasn't about to ask the Empress to serve him.

Oh gods—and he sort of had to pee. How was he going to manage this? He had been so independent, always so independent. Even when he couldn't take care of himself well back on Berk, he had, at least, done it.

The high of surviving—and being allowed to further survive—began to lose its luster as its drawbacks came to light. Hiccup was unwilling to be catered to and manhandled like a cripple. Already, he prepared himself to undergo extraordinary amounts of pain just to be able to relieve himself unaided. Even if it extended the length of time it would take to heal, he would at least do it with his pride in tact.

Hiccup must have been silent for too long, because Toothless began to lightly nose his head.

We'll be fine.

Hiccup turned to face him, feeling the pain and the resistance from his back, already sick of being so disabled. Already sick of being on his stomach.

"I know. But this is going to take forever..." Hiccup couldn't avoid it anymore. "And what the Hel were you thinking?"

What?

"You know what!" Hiccup winced, and made a mental note that raising his voice somehow hurt his back and to never do it again. "You know what," he repeated with more restraint. "You spoke to Gudrid. You...you..."

... offered to cut his life in half for Hiccup.

Hiccup could feel himself getting upset all over again as he recalled the shock and distress when first notified of this proposal. Neither had lessened much since.

Toothless nudged Hiccup's forehead, not seeming to mind the smell of his hair as Hiccup had.
"Calm down, it's okay."

"No, it's not—"

"Hush. Yes it is. Gudrid explained the bond, and the gift to me. And I wanted this bond; I wanted to make it work so badly that I started making possibilities in my mind that never existed before. I had the Powers permission to make such an arrangement."

"Why?" Hiccup asked, staring imploringly at Toothless with the one eye that wasn't mashed into the pillow. Why would you do such a thing?

They could have forgone the bond all together. They could speak to each other; they could spend at least a part of their lives together. Wasn't that enough?

Somehow, Hiccup knew it wasn't. Not for either of them. Not at this point.

"I told you before that I would not survive long without you. If anything, you'd be giving me more time by accepting."

Hiccup could understand what Toothless was saying, but it did nothing to mollify him.

"Because you bonded with a human..."

He'd lose much of his life because he bonded with a human.

"This is what I want. It's what I need. I'd say the bigger choice is on you. Toothless turned the conversation. Do you realize what it would mean if you aged slower than other humans?"

"I don't want to marry," Hiccup reminded him, sounding rather grumpy. He didn't care for humans; his life began with Toothless and it would end with Toothless.

Already, Hiccup knew this wasn't an argument he was going to win. He felt like the damage was already done. The choices he made, the actions he'd taken—they had all led to cutting down the life of this Night Fury. The only question left was: by how much?

He'd feel selfish accepting the bond, and yet, by Toothless' argument, it would be selfish not to.

"You don't have to decide now. This is something you really need to think about. I have thought about it, and I made my choice. And it's the choice best for me. You need to do the same."

Hiccup remained silent—not quite petulant, but still with an air of groused defeat. He could hear a cat mewing somewhere around Toothless' tail, but the shadows within the room had grown too large for him to see. And as the shadows grew, so did his exhaustion.

He hated that too; the complete lack of energy. Why could he only stay awake for one conversation at a time?

"Your vördr is rather attractive by human standards. I can understand that scent you emit better now."

Hiccup bit his lip.

"I want to hit you."

The knowledge that he physically couldn't hit Toothless upset him further. He hated this.
Toothless responded with a lick to the face and blowing out the candle overhead with a flameless breath.

::{"Go to sleep, sourpuss::

"Dnn'know what that means..."

The darkness pulled on his unrealized need for more rest before he could fully hear Toothless’ response.

He sincerely hoped it didn't involve cats providing the dragon with insults.

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The weeks that passed were some of the longest, most hated weeks in Hiccup's young life. Nurses waited them upon constantly and Iason was a regular to their room. It was only through the keen attention to his wounds that Hiccup didn't fall into sepsis or fever. His bandages were cleaned regularly, he received some embarrassing sponge baths from his minders, not including the tongue baths from Toothless or, even rarer, tongue baths from cats (which Hiccup had a sneaking suspicion Toothless was behind).

They received sporadic visits from Zoe, only once accompanied by her sister, Theodora, who hardly spoke at all, and a single, extra visit from Harald, who simply came to check up on their progress. Hiccup knew, with complete certainty, that Harald wanted to see the bow in action.

Harald would be disappointed for quite some time.

As Hiccup healed, he grew weaker. The lack of movement made him feel tired and sluggish and cranky and there were days where he thought maybe death would have been kinder. He was used to being on the move, always traveling, seeing, learning, experiencing—this was Hel for him.

He had only books to ease his mind. Dozens of texts brought to him, some in Norse, but most in English and French. Hiccup wanted to perfect his weaker languages.

Nearly two weeks into his recovery and Hiccup was finally able to sit up on his own. His back was hunched forward, he didn't have the mobility or strength he once did to sit up straight, and his arms needed to support his weight more than his spine could, but it was cause for celebration on his end. He spent almost every waking hour from that point forward sitting up, doing therapeutic exercises to loosen his spine again.

His stomach rest had come to an end, and his back was able to take more and more pressure in the passing days. Occasionally the wound would start to bleed again, especially if he moved too fast or did something that would rub it harshly, but it was hardly cause for worry.

His arm lost its bandages by that point; the skin beneath pale, chafed and sallow against thinned muscles. Hiccup's amazement at healing a break in such short time only fed a growing optimistic spirit.

As long as there was progress, he would smile.

It was also when Toothless had to put his tail down, so to speak, and demand that Hiccup take up shaving again. His sly human had managed to cover the entire, lower half of his face with the red-
brown fur—brighter than the hair on his head and closer to matching the patches above his eyes. Hiccup pouted, naturally, but seemed to enjoy doing an old activity that was once lost to him, so he put up less of a fight than Toothless anticipated.

The easy victory gave Toothless hope that shortening the mane would be next.

The dragon moved around well. He sometimes left the room to explore the city while Hiccup slept, but only in the dead of the night, when none but cats could spot him. He always returned with an apology and guilt; fearful that he left Hiccup vulnerable to any angry Væringjar, he never strayed too far from the building.

Hiccup, on the other hand, encouraged the outings. He felt restless enough in his confinement and would never begrudge his friend for escaping when possible—jealously aside. He wasn't worried about Toothless' safety. The Empress, and the people, and the cats, were so enamored with him that no Viking who liked pay would dare raise a weapon to the dragon. And Toothless would probably get away with whatever retribution he bestowed upon his aggressor.

Toothless' reception in Miklagard was so positive, and so unexpected that, even weeks later, Hiccup still had a hard time coming to terms with the marvel. He owed much of their survival to this unlikely occurrence and, still, accepting Toothless the Cat Deity was a hard pellet to swallow, even as he witnessed it time and time again.

When Toothless left, the cats left...or most of them. Some would stay for the warm imprint on the bed, soaking up the heat and scent. Hiccup would watch the daily 'mother duck and ducklings' procession and shake his head. The ones that stayed would do nothing more than stare at him. Some would try to cuddle up to him, and he would grant them pets, but others would regard him with nothing more and nothing less than tolerance.

He found it weirdly upsetting to be looked down on by the same creatures that loved Toothless so much, and the day that Hiccup could waltz out of that "prison" would not come soon enough.

"Gods, this is so stupid!" Hiccup griped, plopping down on a bench with a hiss.

A month passed since the axe, since Gudrid, and since he received Framherja. Hiccup now spent his days relearning how to walk. He could circle the entire room a few times before having to sit from the exertion, and it was so pathetic that he wanted to kick the closest living thing next to him...which was usually a cat.

He wouldn't. Certainly, not in front of the healer and not in front of Toothless.

"Normal," Iason told him in his broken English. "Doing good. Get-eh, get weight high more. It be easy soon."

His weight and body—a rather sensitive topic. Hiccup had lost a ton of weight—too much for someone who spent his entire life thus far trying to gain it. All the muscle he worked hard to develop in his training with the Magyar had wasted away during his detention. The frustration Hiccup felt, the teasing of his memory, of knowing what he should be capable of, haunted him day in and out. It was a daunting future ahead of him—so much so that he often got discouraged throughout the day, whether practicing walking or waiting for sleep to take him.
Hiccup knew he should be grateful that he was alive and Toothless was alive and happy. But every time he looked down to see protruding ribs and knobby knees that he had been so sure he’d never have to see again, he felt despair and anger and hopelessness well up inside him.

He just wanted to run again. He wanted his prized agility back.

"Use cane," Iason ordered, holding out a simple, but elegant, bone-carved walking stick. Hiccup waved him off without even looking at it—having refused it several times already. He didn’t need a cane. He wasn’t fifty.

"I don’t need a cane, I haff Toothless."

Toothless perked up at the mention of his name. He appeared in a flash for every time Hiccup stumbled or fell, which was amazing considering the blanket of cats resting against his hide.

He gave Hiccup and Iason a gummy smile and thumped his tail once against the ground.

::Empress, incoming!::

Being the only one who could understand Toothless, Hiccup looked to the doorway in time to see Zoe enter the room. Iason only turned when he saw Hiccup dip his head in a respectful greeting.

"And how-eh are the guests of honor?" the Empress asked, looking at both human and dragon.

She flowed into the room, as always, dressed in brightly colored cloths. She came within several feet of Toothless and smiled at the scene of the dragon enshrouded by his feline disciples. Hiccup realized that Zoe often looked like she wanted to touch Toothless, but never could quite bring herself to do it. He didn’t know if this meant she really did hold some sort of fear of him, or if she respected him that much.

"I’m walking," Hiccup briefed her, trying to sound pleased with his progress despite his earlier sulking. He stood to show her, now dressed in a long, loose tunic and leggings that took far too long to put on for such simple garments.

"Excellent," Zoe smiled, thoughtfully. "Then you can-eh walk yourself to the baths."

Hiccup stared at her, caught off guard by the blunt suggestion.

"Uh...I'm sorry, what?"

"If you are going to roam in my empire, then you will not do so looking like beggar."

"Um..."

"Especially if you are rider of Toothless."

Hiccup's eyebrows rose. He had his skin cleaned regularly but his hair was still a mess, and he hadn’t had a real bathing in what felt like ages. Still, it was rather embarrassing to have such a thing pointed out to him by royalty.

::Oh!:: Toothless laughed, enjoying his human's discomfort. He laughed his deep, silly dragon laugh that gave such a human expression to him both Zoe and Iason stared, amazed.

Regardless of their apparent love for the dragon, Hiccup had to wonder how sentient they actually believed Toothless to be.
"You may use the private baths of the-eh palace. Then, when you are freshened, you will move to better quarters," Zoe continued, rather delighted by both Toothless' silly laugh and Hiccup's dumbfounded expression.

"Use cane," Iason repeated, and Hiccup, still fairly dumbstruck, turned to see that mocking staff used by the elderly and helpless thrust toward him once more.

Hiccup would refuse it again, his pride still intact to some degree, until he made it outside and saw how far the Empress' private baths really were.

Only then would Hiccup use the cane...and Toothless.

Chapter End Notes

*Adorable art by verlidaine

**Zoe and Theodora are real** I just sort of dated the timeline for this fic, but I'm not going to stay true to it. I've already thrown in characters that are probably decades apart.

The only fan character I have introduced since the Magyars is Iason. And his only purpose is for healing.

Byzantium is, apparently, full of cats so I simply had to play off of that. Speaking of which...

A huge thanks has to go out to Fjordmustang who has provided so many pictures and descriptions of her experiences with Istanbul. More thanks goes out to Whitefang for giving me some nice, gory details about previous injuries.

This was not a fun chapter—I wanted to drive home how long and boring and irritating healing can be, and it's not necessarily a good thing if I succeeded. It was a hard chapter for me to get through because I really, really just wanted to write the fun stuff. XD
The chills of Haustmánuður arrived in Berk early this year, casting quivers and bumps across any exposed skin in the travel from one home to another. Typically, donning more furs served as the universal solution to an escalation in cold. However, in light of playing the host to the Bog Burglars' annual visit, Vikings had taken to simply drinking more alcohol. Mead, whisky, grape wines, ales—anything that left a warm tummy and a pink face was guzzled all hours of the day.

Thank the gods dragons never raided for barrels.

The meeting of the two tribes rode out much more smoothly than that of last year. No one spoke of the banished son, and the adults partied and argued as they always had in times past. Trades carried on, as usual, alliances were forged amidst families, sheep and daughters passed between households like morning pleasantries between neighbors. An element of Berk's world had shifted back into place.

Even so, not everyone could continue on the old ways; a different sort of tension lingered between the teens—namely between Camicazi and those of Hiccup's former dragon training class. No repeat performance occurred with Astrid and the Bog heir (much to the disappointment of the twins). In fact, hardly any contact between the girls occurred at all. Each ignored the other with steadfast determination. They would grow rather cold and stiff when at close range, yet never shared a spoken word, as though engaged in a silent agreement to pretend the Hiccup-fight fandango never happened at all.

Camicazi spent the month in the company of other tribe members around her age or girls from her own clan—that is, when they weren't engaging in unsightly activities she, herself, had no interest in. As each day spent on the Isle of Berk passed, the blonde realized more and more of her childhood friends preferred flirting with Berkian men to their old pastimes of snitching and fighting. It saddened her, not in the sense that she felt left out, but in that her childhood was at an end. They had encountered a turning point in their lives where the temptation of men would complicate—*pollute*—their view of the world.

It wasn't that she didn't entertain thoughts of a man's body, or have desires of her own, but she knew too many of the men here, and she had her own standards to abide by. She would hold off on her urges this year—with Hiccup gone, there was really no one around who tickled her fancy. And, even then, he only interested her as a puppy would. Or a jester.
Camicazi kept herself occupied with activities of a more innocent nature: sparring, shopping (though much of what she "bought" involved less bartering and more snatching) and, on the rare occasion, bunkering down with a stitch to practice sewing.

She was a warrior, and her mother only required her to know the bare necessities of domestic duties, but Camicazi rather enjoyed the rhythmic motions of a needle through cloth, or the success of seeing a pattern through to the end.

Of course, she would die a crone's peaceful death before ever admitting this guilty pleasure to anyone, so she perfected a good and grumpy scowl to go along with the act to make it look like this was a task she was forced to complete.

The sun blushed an orange of yolk, halfway through its descent, fanning a warm glow to comfortably unwind Berk from another, hectic day. Most of the village gathered down by the docks at this point in the late afternoon, bartering for the last of their fish or tidying up their craft stations. Camicazi enjoyed the quiet, isolated area surrounding the chief's home and away from the bustle of people. A place where she could leave her features unguarded. It was the perfect setting for her to practice her stitch, survey the village, and enjoy the last of the crisp, sunny skies before the winter overcast came to darken their world.

A flicker of blue caught her eye, and Camicazi glanced up to see that Hofferson girl—Astrid—walking alongside a man she did not recognize. Berk would get the occasional ship of neighboring visitors in conjunction with the Burglars on some years, and this year the Devil Dogs made a concurrent appearance. Needless to say, the last week and a half had been a Full Island.

Despite her best efforts, Camicazi found her eyes drawn to the girl whenever she was in range, and would bet her Roman-crafted spear that Astrid suffered the same affliction. That hint of animosity lingered, unfinished business still existed between them. For her part, she hadn't gotten Astrid to admit she was wrong, and the fact would annoy Camicazi until they could have a proper rematch. The mood for one hadn't struck—not once since she got here. The time for fighting over Hiccup's fate had come and gone and it left a bad taste in her mouth.

Camicazi watched as Astrid smiled politely to the man's animated speech. The other young woman looked much more relaxed than Camicazi recalled. There was something off about her last year—she was a loaded bow ready to go off at the slightest provocation. Now, she was far more subdued, with a reservation about her. Less uptight, that was for sure. Happier, but not quite happy.

The young Burglar couldn't bring herself to like the girl. The way she spoke of Hiccup, almost irrationally, like he was Jötunn spawn himself—how he should be killed on sight—would not sit well with her.

Even if she were rather pissed at him herself, the damnable liar.

The crunch of loose rocks underfoot told her of a heavy approach, and the budding woman turned in her position, narrowing her eyes at whoever dared to disturb her quiet time.

It was Snotlout. Nearly double the size he was last year, with wide shoulders and a strong jaw darkened by hair. If it weren't for the same, messy haircut and distinctive facial features, Camicazi almost wouldn't have recognized him when she first stepped off her ship a month earlier. She still experienced moments of unfamiliarity; like she needed time to connect the man before her with the boy she knew her entire life.

As an elect member of the tribe, Snotlout had been dragged to her own village many times in the past, usually thrown in with her and Hiccup as children in an effort to get them to occupy each other
while the adults drank and argued and traded. Snotlout usually had Hiccup in a headlock within moments of authority turning its back, and Camicazi would subsequently rescue the little boy by beating down the larger one with whatever wooden toy she had within her grasp. It was a system they had—bully and rescue. Mean but comfortable. Familiar.

And first broken by Hiccup and his perverse need to always be different.

She missed those simple times. It never occurred to her then that their parents lurked not too far off, making the odd bet about which one she would someday conceive with. Knowing this now somehow left those childhood memories tainted.

"They want us at the meeting," Snotlout informed her in that deeper voice she had yet to get used to.

Camicazi stared at him for a moment, the needle limp in her hand. That's right; that's where her mother was. The meeting. Her tribe was set to leave in a couple days, so they had to get down to business at some point.

The young pirate shrugged, carelessly tossing her patchwork as if it made no matter to her, and set to matching Snotlout's stride down the rocky hill to the Mead Hall. She only hoped it was a quick meeting and she could return to the spot to make sure no admirer decided to take off with Chief Stoick's newly embroidered drawers.

They moved in silence for much of the journey, Camicazi overshadowed by Snotlout's thick frame, but unintimidated by her own loud presence—she may be short, but she would never be ignored.

A giggle broke the silence as they passed a farmhouse—strident, obnoxious, and quite obviously feminine.

Camicazi looked over to the structure, noticing a plump backend wriggling about just visible beyond the board of a downspout. The belt—made of Vestfold leather and bedazzled with precious metals—belonged to a woman of her tribe—Bodil—and if not for Camicazi's comprehensive awareness of Bodil's outfit, she would have never put such a girlish noise to the typically gruff Bog.

It didn't take Camicazi long to figure out what was happening when a large, unfamiliar, and rather hairy hand snuck out and gave Bodil's bottom a good squeeze.

Camicazi rolled her eyes at the actions of both parties and continued to march forward through the thickening awkwardness—quite conscious of how obvious the tryst was to Snotlout as well.

At sixteen she was now far more aware of why her tribe stayed so long, why some women would target well-established men and spend most of the stay with them, only to announce a pregnancy weeks later. Rarely was there ever the intention of marrying when it came to Bog Burglars, each sovereign woman perfectly content to carry on their lineage through 'illegitimacy' as long as nothing else tied them down. On the rare occasion, a Burglar would be properly wooed into wedlock, thus leaving the tribe, but for the most part they stuck to their clan, braving the most tremulous of seas with nothing to support them but the wood beneath their feet, the wiles of their hearts, and their sisters.

Camicazi knew her own father was a Castilian nobleman that took over Valencia—a perfectly respectable specimen to father the future leader of the Bog Burglars, both powerful and influential. She also knew it wouldn't be long before all eyes were on her to find the proper sire for the next heir, and she would be expected to meet, if not surpass, the standards her mother set.

Then again, Bertha often made off-hand comments how Camicazi seemed to take after the other man
she had been intimate with at the time. Some Saxon fellow named Robin-egg, or some such matter. If that were the case, then she pretty much had a clean slate when it came to the value of a man’s seed.

Whoever won out for the position of her father did not stir the personal concern of the child in question; Camicazi only cared that she was alive, and that she knew how to live. She was blessed with freedom and skill, and she was rather fond of her appearance as a whole. She might admit to the occasional daydream of being taller. Her father could not have been a very tall man for her, at sixteen, to be the height she was; certainly, he must have been smaller than her mother, who maintained a stature that Camicazi would never reach.

Frowning at her line of thought, the blonde looked down at her chest. Of all the things to inherit from Big-Boobied Bertha...

The towering structure of the Mead Hall suddenly loomed before them, casting a shadow over her form and forcing awareness back to her surroundings. Camicazi shook from her head thoughts of her out-of-place breasts-. She was about to attend a multi-clan meeting, about to take another step further into a future of ruling a tribe. Now was not the time to be griping about her chest size.

She snuck a glance over at Snotlout, only to see him peeking over at the same view she had just been—and not Bodil's backend.

As if reflexively sensing something amiss, Snotlout seemed to realize her attention was now on him and he immediately averted his eyes back to their destination, giving a weak cough into his fist.

"So, you're invited to the meeting too?" Camicazi asked. Though slightly annoyed with the young man, she couldn't quite fault him for staring at her breasts—she had trouble not looking at them herself sometimes. Growing top-heavy over the past year not only looked odd on her short frame, it was a burden she had yet to adjust to when fighting. Out of balance like a bad axe.

And the rumors that he would be next in line to take command of Berk left her with the mind-boggling knowledge that she would have to manage at least a tentative friendship with the obnoxious boy.

"Yep," Snotlout grinned, secretly glad for something to boast about, "I practically have the chieftainship in the bag."

'What if Hiccup comes back?' Camicazi wanted to ask. 'What if his outlawry is abated before you take over?'

She didn't, of course. Something told her such presumptuous query would not be kindly received. While never one to shy away from confrontation, Camicazi slowly learned the art of choosing her battles as she approached womanhood. Going into a meeting, where she would be expected to uphold all the attitude of an heir—and alongside a potential alliance holder—was not the situation to start prodding with uncomfortable questions.

They ascended the crumbling, stone steps in sync, Snotlout's slightly longer legs moving slower against Camicazi's short and swift strides. The rutted jumble of deep shouts attempting to drown out one another wafted from the cracked door in place of the usual aroma of mutton and ale.

"Is the meeting already in progress?" Camicazi asked, trying to force politeness over what she initially wanted to ask.

"Just about, yeah," the brunet reported. Somehow, even as he climbed the steps, he managed to keep
his chest puffed out, still evidently riding on the comment of being chief. "From what I've heard, they're addressing the new nest issue, seeing how there's not going to be any more hunting parties for it."

The way Snotlout's face contorted when he said 'nest issue' spoke volumes of his own opinion.

Camicaizi took the bait, pacing faster and moving up a few steps to gain a closer sense of eye-level.

"Nest issue?"

He grunted, rolling his eyes beneath his thick brow. "Yeah. We got a tip-off a while back about how the dragons are operated and how it's pointless to keep searching for the nest. Apparently it's impossible to find. So...yeah, no more hunts."

This was the year he would have been going on the final expedition. His chance to fight hordes of dragons without having to worry about protecting civilians or livestock or houses or fire management. It would have been his chance to prove to all the naysayers and doubters of his ascension that he could be a capable and brave leader too, even if he didn't have the direct birthright.

His grandfather had done it before—had taken over as chieftain when no rightful heir were able—and he would as well.

But, unlike his grandfather, Snotlout had no intention of giving it back.

They leveled out at the top of the steps, bringing Camicaizi back to his nose's height.

Something about Snotlout's response made Camicaizi's heart leap with a knowing anticipation and a long-missed excitement—a spark that had been missing from Berk for too long.

"Where'd you get this tip-off?" she asked, unable to quite keep the smile from her face.

Snotlout reached the door first, holding it open for her in a newly forced habit, courtesy of his father. He looked down at her as she passed him, the shadows of the gigantic, oak doorframe coloring his eyes a dark grey.

"Guess."

Camicaizi smirked. Perhaps this meeting would be more interesting that she expected.
In no way was the meeting interesting.

Camicazi swayed on her feet and quickly clenched the muscles in her legs to keep the tired motion from detection. At this point it was Stoick's second-in-command, Snotlout's father, who had the floor, and he spoke in a low, deep voice (as every other speaker had), about issues that had no impact over her and, thus, hardly cared for. The lighting in the Hall was dim, and the air warm and stifling thanks to the crushing proximity of dozens of meaty bodies, creating the perfect, soporific atmosphere to suffer through.

With some satisfaction, she noticed that Snotlout fared no better than herself; every so often his eyes would glaze over and he would comically snap to attention with a series of rapid blinks. He stayed just behind his father's shoulder, visible enough to announce status but just enough in the shadows for his inattention to remain covert.

Perhaps if she had been allowed to speak, or have any input at all on the decisions being discussed, she would be more interested in negotiations. As it were, she was still only to observe, and would most likely be expected to relive the experience back in the comfort of her ship where her mother would put her through the ring of breaking down topics and finding faults and boons in the ultimate decisions.

She knew all that she needed to know (in her humble opinion): the searches for the nest would be stopped. Of course, at first announcement this caused a riot, and the Berkian counsel was forced to hash out their reasoning piece by tedious piece.

They brought up history, patterns, the stretching of resources, the losses of last winter and their expected losses this one. But not once, in the in-depth discussion, was Hiccup mentioned.

It was the only topic Camicazi actively paid attention to and she was bitterly disappointed at how everything that could possibly be credited to Hiccup was slathered up in lies and misleading facts. The Berkians weren't being malicious in their cover up; the end result would still be the same. They most likely omitted Hiccup's involvement to save their own face. After all, who would take advice from a traitor?

As that particular subject tapered off, most, ultimately, accepted that Berk would no longer seek out the nest. But neither the Dogs nor the Bogs promised to agree to the same code. The Devil Dogs suffered attacks on their village as well. Unlike Berk, they were not as stretched for resources; they had more access to forests, more food, and better cover from dragons. They swore to continue searching for the nest until they found it, or every last hunter was dead.

The Bog Burglars didn't have to worry about dragon attacks on their base village—they were just out of reach...for the nonce. Most of her clan, including Camicazi, had noticed a disturbing pattern of new villages being subjected to attacks, each striking closer to their home, as if the dragons were expanding their territory to terror.

A day would come when the Bog Burglars would have to focus on protecting rather than exploring, and, from the looks of it, it would be during Camicazi's reign.

For now, Camicazi would—bitterly—accept that Hiccup's involvement would remain uncredited. She had a feeling that her mother was, at least, more privy to the details about the source of this
information than what was formally being presented, and possibly the chief of the Devil Dogs as well. It would be no easy feat getting the masses to accept indirect aid from a traitor, and sequestering the truth would be less messy. At the present time, anyway.

One day, the truth would unfurl. Camicazi personally believed that revealing that someone in direct communication with dragons came up with this solution, rather than a plan formed from unsavory statics, would open more people to sharing the idea.

A loud clap startled her from her reverie, and Camicazi turned wide eyes onto the thick, ginger-haired arms of Stoick the Vast as they waved for everyone's attention. She missed the change in speaker.

"Alrigh'! That should do it for the goat matter. Now, there's just one more thing to discuss," Stoick announced and his eyes cut to Camicazi.

Not to her mother, but to her. And with his eyes came most everyone else's.

The most worrying part to the young woman, more so than suddenly being put on the spot, was that she caught her mother nodding back to Stoick without question, like a secret agreement had already been made without her knowledge.

Dread, cold and heavy, settled in the deepest part of her stomach.

"I can bathe myself!" Hiccup shrieked for the umpteenth time, trying, and failing, to pull his arm away from the strong-fingered grip on his left elbow. That arm was still weak, and Hiccup far too conscious of its state, so when the male aide, no older than himself, tugged it back, Hiccup had little choice but to scowl and tolerate the treatment.

One of the two boys scrubbing him down with a rough, hand-cloth muttered in Greek. Hiccup could almost hear the meaning behind the incomprehensible words:

No you can't. It's a miracle you can move at all, so just sit your grubby arse down. It's nothing I haven't seen before.

True as it might be, Hiccup couldn't very well sit there and simply take having his armpit scrubbed by some crazy stranger. Not without voicing his complaints. And complaints were the only defense he had left; the walk to the Empress' baths had exhausted him.

It seemed as though every eye in the city followed he and Toothless as they moved from one building to another; all activity had stopped simply to watch them, so he struggled through the fatigue that plagued and made each step as strong as he could. Because his pride demanded he put on a show, Hiccup ignored the intense desire to climb atop Toothless' back and ride the entire way there.

They had made it to the crux of the world, a place so populated with humans that people either didn't know much about dragons, or saw them in a more neutral and positive light than that of the north. Toothless' acceptance was an unreal blessing and, though appreciated, it would take much getting used to for Hiccup. He still flinched at any sharp movements within the crowd, still dug his fingers in to Toothless' neck at the slightest provocation, still expected someone loaded with Viking blood to rush from the masses with a weapon raised.
It never happened, of course. They received a wide berth and a sea of open mouths and dazzled eyes. Faces twitched in their awe-filled expressions as people fought within themselves not to reach out and touch the mystical, black scales of a legendary creature.

The Empress moved alongside them, matching their slow pace, looking more out of place along the streets and among the people than the Night Fury. Hiccup got the impression that this was a rare occurrence—to see royalty flitting amidst the commoners without an entire guard flanking her. But Empress Zoe seemed to bask in the public proximity to the dragon. If she weren't popular before, this surely gave her image quite the boost.

Hiccup knew that the Empress' only fascination with them lay with Toothless—as was the case with most inhabitants of Miklagard—and that she only gave him hospitality befitting of royalty for his close association the dragon. He also knew she viewed him as more of a fun project than a person. Clean him up. Fix his wounds. Make him 'civilized' again, as Harald so rudely put it one time.

Hiccup frowned, attempting to block out the fact that other men were washing him by directing his irritation at something else. That particular Viking annoyed him to no end. Destroyed weeks of his life. Painful, infuriating weeks that left him weak and emaciated and back at square one. And he still had the audacity to pop in every now and then to see if Hiccup had healed yet.

Hiccup was already breaking records for surviving in the first place! And it wasn't as though he had enjoyed surviving either; he almost preferred the isolation of healing to the extra attentions of men in towels...

He was clad only in a waistcloth himself!

Granted this was better than the alternative—an instant, gory death—but humiliation through bathing was a punishment he never thought he'd be subject to.

The first part of the bath was tolerable, though Hiccup couldn't quite see the point in receiving a massage when the aim was to get clean. The Empress gave him a short run-down of what the bath would entail before leaving him to change. He accepted the terms without much fuss at the time, still rather embarrassed about having his state of hygiene pointed out to him by her.

The room he started in was hot, with steam filling the air that opened his lungs and caused his skin to slick with sweat. He laid on a heated slab of marble, assuming the entire point of sweating this much in a 'bath' was to make him want to bathe even more.

Toothless didn't sweat; he spent that time prancing around Hiccup in circles, expressing how excited he was that Hiccup was walking now, and asking, repeatedly, how long it would be until they flew again.

Hiccup replied, amused but exasperated, in undertones, conscious of the fact that no one else would understand he engaged in a two-sided conversation.

He allowed an older man to massage him without much protest—he had been warned, after all—but he couldn't enjoy the massage fully. People touching him felt too weird now. Warm, hard scales were a natural thing against his body—as common and comfortable as a pillow beneath a head—but not the squishiness of skin molding on skin, and Hiccup remained stiff through much of the process. The masseur directed most of the attention to Hiccup's back, working the unused muscles around the wound area and focusing on the knots in his shoulders and neck from spending so long a time on his stomach. Though not particular to massages on a personal level, Hiccup would be the first to admit that it was a good thing for his body.
When he was told to move onto the next room, the recovering boy looked forward to a nice, long soak in cool water—to be rid of the sweat and the feel of hands on him.

The next thing he knew, he had more than one set of hands on his skin and, rather than soaking in a pool, he had a bucket of water dumped on his head as he was ushered onto hard seating.

::Will you settle down and just enjoy this?: Toothless' lazy voice interrupted his introspection. ::It's not so bad::

Hiccup tossed a dark look over at the winged lizard, who currently sprawled across a marble slap, large and circular, set in the center of the room—the very same Hiccup now sat on the edge of.

"Why are they here?" Hiccup muttered, his voice low as a caution to attention but the whine still very evident. He didn't refer to the two men who cleaned him; he referred to the two women who cleaned Toothless.

Earlier, when they changed rooms, Toothless made a show of growling at any man who approached and purring loudly when presented with a woman—using actions that could be understood by any being. For the life of him, Hiccup had no idea what the dragon was playing at.

::I had a feeling they'd be better with their hands—oooh, and I was right::

Toothless closed his eyes, the smile clear on his face as one of the young women worked some suds thoroughly, but delicately, along the ridges of his back.

Hiccup could feel his face heat at the audacity of the beast.

"I can't believe you!" he hissed, forgetting all about discretion. He made to face Toothless but one of the aides grabbed his foot and began scrubbing roughly between his toes, keeping him rooted. Hiccup was forced to continue his surreptitious look over his shoulder. "You make fun of me about the mermaids, and then you go and have a bunch of human girls hang all over you?"

Young, rather pretty girls, garbed only in the same towels as everyone else in the room.

Toothless cracked open a large, reptilian eye.
Almost against his will, Hiccup spared one of the girls a look; she met his eyes, grinned and went back to massaging Toothless' tail.

Hiccup let out a breath he hadn't realized he hitched upon making eye contact and faced forward once more.

"Odin, give me strength," he whispered to himself, unable to get the heat to leave his cheeks. "Or Thor, since you're more likely paying attention to me."

He spared a quick glance at Framherja, who was now set against a different wall than that of his bed. He harbored no fears of anyone trying to grab it; apparently, after the debacle in the Hippodrome, most everybody knew it as "the weapon that hurts any handler other than its own".

"Gah—agh—!"

One of the boys dumped a bowl of warm water over his head.

Hiccup sputtered, angry and shocked. "Hey—"

And then another followed. Then more soap came and Hiccup learned to keep his mouth shut after that. He couldn't see; his hair curtained around his face, so thick with froth that his eyes were forced to tightly clench. Two sets of fingers gently rocked his head as they worked into his scalp.

Hiccup opted not to complain about this part; he couldn't remember the last time his hair felt clean. So he took the treatment in silence, displaying patience and poise for the first time throughout the lathering and rinsing. He even allowed the other aide to do some simultaneous, weird massage to his calf.

For the first time since the whole process began, Hiccup found the sensations felt relaxing. Maybe, if he didn't think so much on the fact that other people were bathing him he would be able to enjoy this. It helped that his eyes were closed, and, since he could block out the sight of the boys by doing so, he kept them closed even after he felt enough water dump on his head to clear away the suds for good.

It was when Hiccup's head tugged gently to the side, the pull concentrated on one area of his scalp as if a lock of his hair were drawn, that his eyes reopened...

Just in time to see a length of sodden, dark tresses hit the marble by his thigh. He jerked away from both boys, too shocked to react to the pain in his back or head.

"Wait—what...hey, no!"

He glared at the aid that just cut his hair; the man stared back, bewildered, acting for all the world as if he didn't know he had done anything wrong. The blade in his hand looked as guilty as its wielder.

::Yes! Yes!::

Toothless had his tongue out, his tail wriggling in happiness. The girls cooed, only adding to Hiccup's irritation. Why was everyone against him in this city?

"You can't cut my hair," Hiccup told the teen slowly, secretly hoping the 'slow and loud' technique would work against logic and language barriers just this once.
The boy stared back at Hiccup and said in a clear, curt voice: "Aftokrateira."

Hiccup glowered. It was the only word he knew in Greek. The one used most often by Iason whenever he arrived with Zoe. The one mumbled with each bow delivered by those they passed in the streets.

*Empress.*

The empress ordered this.

::*Yes you can*:: Toothless contradicted Hiccup's earlier claim, and Hiccup was quite thankful he was the only one who could understand the Night Fury. He had a feeling his opinion would always be overruled by Toothless in this particular empire.

The aid moved forward with the knife again. Hiccup leaned back.

Who just *cuts* someone's hair without at least *telling* them first?

::*Come on, Hiccup*:: Toothless urged. ::*You know it needs to be done. You couldn't even manage it when we were flying*::

Hiccup knew he needed a haircut. But he hated being manhandled like this. Couldn't the Empress just ask first?

"Aftokrateira," the aid repeated, annoyingly lighthearted about the matter.

Hiccup released a heavy breath.

"Fine," he grumbled. He slouched forward, his body posture full of defeat, and he kept his eyes turned down as the darker-skinned boy returned to cutting down over a year's worth of untamed hair.

::*Good man*:: Toothless applauded, releasing a loud purr that had the girls tittering. ::*You won't regret this. You'll look sharp; sharp enough to attract plenty of females that you'll never mate with*::

Hiccup snorted.

::*I hope you know what's coming next, right*::

Hiccup did not reply. Still watching his hair fall in clumps around his lap, still miserable in the sense that he was back to being helpless. Helpless and harmless enough for people to think they can suddenly *cut his hair*.

What was *wrong* with these people?

::*Because I will not rest until I make your body understand the purpose of fur*:: Toothless continued, not picking up on the dark cloud over Hiccup's head.

The young man flicked a bleak look to his companion before settling it back on his knees, where hair continued to pile.

"There is nothing else I'm getting rid of."

How short were they cutting it? There seemed to be so much on the floor now, but he could still feel the newly hacked bits touching his chin. Had it really gotten so long?

::*Is it going to keep popping up in weird places*:: Toothless asked. ::*It wasn't on your face when we*
first met, and then it was. Now you have the fur growing on your chest and stomach. You wear the tunics there for the purpose of keeping warm and have protection, so clearly you do not need it:

Hiccup turned his head sharply to face the dragon, not hearing the aid cutting his hair swear at almost nicking his scalp.

"Toothless...!" Hiccup began forbiddingly. "I am not going to shave my chest!"

There were some lines that simply wouldn't be crossed.

Neither of the girls tending to Toothless spoke Norse, of this, Hiccup was almost positive, but they began giggling like mad nonetheless. He realized his posture must have given him away—the way he subconsciously tried to cover his sparse garden of hair with thin arms like he could protect it from being removed by Toothless.

A sense of unreasonable mortification crept up on him. It left his face heated and continued his attempt to shield his body.

"Damn it, Toothless..."

If it were just the two of them, Hiccup wouldn't have felt nearly so exposed. But they weren't alone. There were people. Girls. Girls who giggled at him...

Was it normal to feel this embarrassed all the time around other people? Hiccup tried to remember what it was like back on Berk. He recalled being the butt of jokes, often feeling self-conscious... but instead of shying away, he would constantly try and try again. Something made him believe that embarrassing himself was worth eventual approval.

And now he cared less for approval and more for his pride.

"You have a sick, sick dragon if he wants to shave your chest."

Hiccup whipped his head around in the opposite direction, eliciting another Greek curse word from the haircutter.

Halvdan, armed with a smile neither malicious, nor kind, leaned against the archway to the next room. "You hold onto that hair, boy. It's one of the few things 'man' about yeh."

Chapter End Notes

**I'm having Stoick and Spitelout be half-brothers sharing the same mother (chief line fall's through Stoick's father) it comes from whoever Hiccup and Snotlout's maternal grandmother was.

Camicazi's 'patchwork' is rather horrible, but she thinks its great. What matters is that she likes it :)

Devil Dogs will not be found on HTTYD-wiki. I made them up. It was either the Devil Dogs or the Awesome Possums, and there's just not a lot of opossum about Vikings.
Triumphed

Chapter Summary

Now back on his feet, Hiccup slowly starts the project of returning

Chapter Notes

Russian accents ahead: 'E sounds – 'ay', 'I' sounds – 'ee'. Those should be the only difficulties. Aside from the lack of articles. Read on!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Triumphed

Nothing enhanced an awkward moment quite like the grating, not-quite-silent rustle of chainmail beneath cloth. Hiccup supposed he wasn't helping the situation by willing Halvdan's back to combust into flames through the power of his stare, but, then again, he didn't care much for the comfort of the man.

The party of three slowly made their way through the maze of stone and marble hallways. Columns and statues and windows, rugs and tapestries and ornaments, art and history and value surrounded Hiccup—things so precious he could buy his own island—but the boy had no time to enjoy the sight. It didn't matter that such advanced architecture and shiny objects would usually have him salivating at the mouth—all of it could be ignored in light of keeping his full attention on the "escort" to his new quarters.

"Oi, for the last time, lad—I ain't here to cause trouble!" Halvdan exclaimed when the heat of Hiccup's stare became too much in the stifling silence. "Can I at least help you—"

"No," Hiccup returned flatly and leaned more heavily onto Toothless. Silk robe—silk!—provided for him slipped a bit against the smooth scales, throwing more of his weight into the Night Fury than he intended.

Toothless didn't budge in his support. He'd never say this to Hiccup, knowing how sensitive the boy was about his situation, but the loss in weight was more noticeable than ever at times like these. It
hardly strained his neck to uphold most of his human.

The dragon's toxic stare mimicked Hiccup's in both orientation and intensity, and it dared the Viking to push his luck any farther than he already had. Halvdan quickly went back to leading them through the palace halls.

Hiccup released a small sigh once Halvdan's eyes faced forward; he already felt weary from all the walking he had done that day, he didn't need stress added to his physical drain. Any and all relaxation brought on by the massage had fled his body, thanks to Halvdan's presence. The man insisted he was there on good will and good will alone, having volunteered to take the travelers to their new room when all other candidates, Empress included, were too busy.

Volunteered. Hiccup mentally scoffed. Either Halvdan wanted a private revenge for them getting off so easily or he wanted to finish the job Harald couldn't himself. The Viking's outstanding friendly demeanor would not fool him.

"You look good," Halvdan began conversationally. "Clean."

"Shut up."
Halvdan laughed, taking the curt response in stride. "Good to see your attitude's not changed much!"

Hiccup didn't favor him with any more responses, realizing there was little he could say that offended the man. Halvdan was too easygoing; too accepting once something was acceptable to be accepted.

Hiccup would never trust him.

"That's quite a feat, s'all I'm saying. To have your mind 'n' all that. I mean, a near-death experience like that?" Halvdan whistled. "Better men than you have come out mere shells of themselves, even after they physically recover. But you seem to be doing alright, considering..."

::Like you've ever met a better man:: Toothless scoffed, loyal as ever. It earned him an affectionate scratch behind an ear-plate. Halvdan may not have understood the dragon's words, but he certainly understood the low snarl that accompanied them. His shoulders jumped at the noise.

"Look..." Halvdan tried again. He dragged a hand through the vibrant, red length of his hair in a sudden and isolated show of discomfort "I know Harald won't say it, but I'll gladly apologize."

Hiccup, momentarily forgetting his hard display of mistrust, goggled at the broad reach of Halvdan's back.

Did he just...?

Unbeknownst to Hiccup, his feet began to brake as his mind tried to rework Halvdan's declaration into something far more malicious, something more bearable. Toothless shouldered the small of his back into keeping up the slow, but manageable, pace.

::I can only sense honesty:: the dragon contributed, though he sounded as perturbed as Hiccup felt. It probably took all of Toothless' self control to keep from giving the man a good bite in the butt. After all, Halvdan didn't hold nearly as much sway with the Væringjar as Harald did. Unfortunate accidents befalling him could be forgiven and overlooked.

Halvdan must have sensed a reaction other than stony silence, because he chanced a look over his shoulder. Hiccup quickly squared his face again, but he feared the damage had been done.
Sure enough Halvdan smiled wider.

"Don't expect you to trust me, o'course," the large man continued. "'Orrible, 'orrible thing that happened to ya. Mighty ballsy of you, though—ain't no one gonna argue that. A bunch of the guys want to do right by you and help you get your strength back...when you can move better that is..."

Halvdan kept his pace slow as he spoke, kept his back to the Viking and dragon in a show of trust, kept a good, agreeable distance so not to offset the boy anymore than he was... and Hiccup hated him for it. He hated the consideration Halvdan showed him, hated the respect when, just a month prior, he had been bruising Hiccup's ribs for mouthing off.

He shouldn't have to work to stay mad at a Viking. It should be easy.

Hiccup didn't know if he could forgive himself if he forgave one of them.

He glanced down at the long, rangy legs moving the silken robe (cloth that felt like water on his body). They ached from misuse; the muscles were worked overtime today and promised severe retribution in the morning. He focused on this pain, as well as the cramping burn in his back—a gnawing sensation that seemed destined to linger forever.

Once he got a firm hold on the disturbing realization that he couldn't remember what his back felt like before the axe, hating Halvdan came easier.

"Welp, here we are!"

Hiccup lifted his eyes from the floor, passing over Halvdan's form so that he would be nothing more than a silhouette in his memories, and focused directly on the room beyond the open doorway Halvdan presented.

He moved first, separating himself from Toothless and taking unhurried, easy steps into his new quarters. He could feel Toothless follow closely behind him; there to make sure Halvdan didn't try anything. The Viking stood stock-still, leaning against the wall and avoiding any and all movements remotely threatening.

Much like his experience walking through the very public streets of Miklagard, Hiccup had the insane urge not to show a shred of weakness as his own actions came under the scrutiny of an
enemy. He tightened his stomach muscles, straightened his posture (oh, how his back screamed in protest) and made each step as strong and purposeful as he could.

Thankfully, it was a short walk over the threshold, and Hiccup’s artful mind finally and forcefully overtook his stubborn, protective instinct.

The room was more beautiful than the hallway.

Solid, white, marbled walls stretched up into a high-arched ceiling. Light flooded in through gigantic, stained-glass windows that painted colors across a mountain of tasseled pillows piled atop the bed. And the bed—draped in silk sheets and even larger than the one he had before. Toothless would fit right on it without even having to touch him—Hiccup knew he'd still sleep against the dragon. Somewhere along their travels the habit had evolved from a comfort into a necessity.

Hiccup had to turn his head to fully take in the full span of the marvel. Built into every wall was cushioned seating, interrupted only by vases and columns and more statues—each creation of stone glittered in the early afternoon light, dazzling his eyes to their clean curves and simple, but ingenious design.

Hiccup could easily ignore the Christian influence on most of the art; it was still stunning. The visionary within—the one that had been pushed to the very depths of his subconscious as he tried to make sense of his life—reared up with a vengeance. His fingers twitched; he had a mad urge to reach for his journal and—

Oh. He didn't have his journal.

He fell from his abrupt, euphoric daze. Suddenly remembering where he was, why he was there and who was right behind him, the young man spun on his heel in a show of agility not seen in weeks.

Halvdan stood in the doorway, half-a-step from entering himself, his mouth opening, and the beginnings of a smile on his face.

Hiccup slammed the door shut.

"Oi!" He heard the indignant shout muffled through the thickness of the door, but Hiccup could draw very little satisfaction from the indignation.
Twisting like that...bad idea.

The young man remained bent over, one arm braced tightly against the doorjamb, the other, stiff-fingered and shaking, hovered near his ribs as though unsure if applying pressure would help or not.

He wasn't aware of whether he released a whimper of pain or not, he wasn't aware of how long he stayed like that until a dark nose nudged his shoulder.

::You okay?::

Hiccup turned his head, giving the dragon a weak smile.

"Yeah," he got out in a coarse whisper. "Just being stupid."

::It was funny, if that helps::

"It does," Hiccup grinned, more easily, and straightened, slow and considerate of his poor back.

Dammit to Hel, he was too young to be thinking elderly thoughts!

He released a heavy breath and ran a hand through his much shorter hair. It felt soft between his fingers, light and fluffy and barely there. It could easily be compared to the silk clothing he wore.

He was caught between annoyance and begrudging acceptance of this new development when a blurred motion in his peripheral caught his attention. He jumped, not anticipating any added company, and the sight of a man staring back at him wrenched his heart into a second convulsion of fright—a man tall and gaunt and framed in brass.

A mirror!

Hiccup sucked in a breath. It was a mirror that startled him, indirectly. And that would mean...
His heart continued to thud savagely against his ribs from the scare. With a stomach still clenched in the sensation of a sudden drop, Hiccup hobbled closer to the looking glass. Mirrors were rare enough, but he supposed royalty had plenty of them...

The man across from him, the one trapped within the glass, approached with extreme caution. He was nervous, frightened that the wide, green eyes boring into his being were his own. He didn't know this person. This wasn't him.

Hiccup swallowed, watching in morbid fascination as the Adam's apple in the reflection bobbed with the same movement.

This was him.

His hand came up and long, spindly fingers traced an unfamiliar face. He could feel the rough patches over his cheekbones that were exposed to the most windburn, but never before could he see the shine of them—such a ripe smudge against a youthful face. There used to be more fat around his mouth, but now his cheeks bore a slight concavity, adding emphasis to a broader jawbone than he recalled ever bearing. His brow hung over his eyes more—eyes set deeper, darker—his neck was thicker, his shoulders...

Despite the weight he lost, his shoulders stretched wider, each end capped in a strapping curve of bone. His narrow, slight, abominable shoulders were no more. Just...gone.

He had no idea...he could have never imagined...

Toothless sidled in the picture from the left.

With the dragon seated at his side, Hiccup realized they were at eye-level with each other. He knew that he often met Toothless' eyes when the dragon "sat" and he stood, but seeing them side-by-side at a new perspective made him realize that he had grown. When? When had this happened? When he was hidden from the world—tripping over roots and ducking boughs?

The dragon's eyes were as impossibly wide as Hiccup's. The human would have laughed at such a matching, mis-matched pair if he weren't currently battling hyperventilation.
::Wow:: Toothless hushed to the picture painted in the glass. ::It's no wonder humans love me...I look good!::

The spell had broken, and Hiccup was able to tear his eyes away from "his" image and direct them onto Toothless'.

"Arrogant twit," he murmured in a voice he, thankfully, remembered as his own. His eyes trailed back to 'himself', where the lips on the man had moved. Oddly enough, hearing the voice come from such a body seemed...right, almost. They fit together better than what his memory told of his appearance.

Had his voice changed along with his body? He couldn't recall when it happened, but he felt like he had experienced moments of obvious changes...

Still, something about Toothless' casual acceptance of their appearance struck Hiccup as off, and he narrowed his eyes at the Night Fury.

"You know what mirrors are?"

Why was Toothless not freaking out like he was?

Unlike his human companion, Toothless was able to turn fully away from the mirror to give Hiccup the full brunt of his annoyance.

::I know what a reflection is:: he deadpanned. Turning back to the mirror, Toothless brought his nose to the glass, sniffing. ::Mirrors? I like these mirrors. Definitely the best human invention, ever::

Hiccup snorted. He couldn't agree less.

Unable to help himself, he touched the side of his face again, the touch felt familiar, but the sight was too surreal. This wasn't how murky waters depicted him to look. This wasn't the boy from his memory. He felt like he missed something along the way, like he jumped from boy to stranger in his time away from civilization, and was now unprepared for the pang of loss that came with it.
His hair brushed along his jaw and curled at the nape of his neck, longer than when he left Berk, though still choppy. More red highlights had blossomed among the strands after so much time in the sun, and the freckles! Red and brown speckled his face so thickly he could hardly find the shadow where his beard would grow. Nature had changed him nearly as much as time.

He touched his hair again and frowned.

"Wish I was any good at braids," he grumbled, suddenly remembering, and missing, the Magyars. Katul had put the braids in his hair and he left them, undisturbed, up until this day. He wished he could have seen himself with them in. He was sure they wouldn't have made a very big impact on his appearance, but they represented a piece of him that had been changed forever, simply because he met the right people at the right time—

And then Hiccup realized what bothered him so much—or, rather, one of the many things that bothered him. His fringe—the hair in front—they didn't cut it shorter. Too much of his forehead was left visible.

As if heard by the Norns themselves, a knock sounded on Hiccup's door, pulling his hand away from his head.

He only paused to exchange a quick glance with Toothless before a short shamble across the floor had him back in front of the entryway. He pulled it open, hoping it was Iason so he could get some more numbing medicines for the burn that continued to plague him.

His face dropped when he saw Halvdan on the other end, appearing far less friendly after their recent parting. The man held out Hiccup's pack with one arm.

*His pack!* They, the Væringjar, had kept it hostage to discourage his leaving (as if he could!), but now it was returned to him at long last.

"You get this now—" Halvdan moved to step inside, fully intent on settling the bag himself.

Oh, no.

Bracing himself for the pain he knew would follow, Hiccup snatched the bag out of Halvdan’s hand, using all the strength of his mind and body to keep it lifted, wanting to make it look as easy for him
as it was for Halvdan.

Halvdan's mouth opened again and Hiccup, again, slammed the door in his face.

The bag crashed to the ground the second he was shielded from the judgment of the Viking's stare.

"Oh—for the love of Freyja's bouncin'—" The string of obscenities that followed caused Hiccup's eyebrows to rise through his pain, and was only silenced after a short, but effective, warning roar courtesy of Toothless.

Hiccup breathed heavily through his nose—it hurt, oh, how it hurt, but he could handle it, he could—and fell into a crouch to root through his pack rather than bending over. He didn't bother to check for the rubies or other valuables, he didn't take inventory of any kind; he went straight for his dagger.

He found it in record time, the palpitating torment in his back ebbing by then, but he had to falter at the sight of Astrid's axe back with his belongings. They cleaned the blood, but Hiccup couldn't stop his hand from shaking when he brushed against its blade, he couldn't fight the wince as a phantom spasm ran across the lower wings of his shoulders.

He wouldn't think about it, he wouldn't question why they gave it back to him—whether the intent was malicious or in good faith. His self-appointed mission was more important, and, dagger in hand, he steadily returned to the mirror.

Toothless watched his human move in silence, not fully understanding what was going through his head until he witnessed the boy uphold a measured pinch of fur at the top of his head before sawing against the strands.

::You're doing more?:: Toothless sounded shocked, though not altogether displeased.

"It's wrong," Hiccup grunted, his face contorted against the pulls. The blade was dull and needed sharpening.

After a few more hacks, he managed to create a similar replica of his choppy bangs. He swept them to the side. He looked more familiar. It would do.
Hiccup sighed again, annoyed at several thing: at what he had to do to his hair, at Halvdan, at this man that masqueraded as himself...

He glared at his reflection in some weird attempt at self-intimidation, to make his displeasure known at having such unfamiliarity thrust upon him.

*That* was when he spotted it. Hiccup realized the most obvious—penetrating yet understated—difference between his memory of himself and this spectacle facing him. It wasn't his hair that was the problem.

It was the character.

He didn't slouch; he didn't curl into himself as he subconsciously would in his youth. Even injured, there was no latent attempt to protect himself from outside harm. A confidence radiated from his shoulders, his legs, his features—subtle, slightly feral, but *there*. A powerful statement so alien, so novel to be coupled with *him*, that he immediately dismissed it as wrong.

He watched his eyes lighten and some of that guarded mistrust lifted from his body language.

This was *him*. This was who Domokos could see, this was who Gudrid wanted to kiss, and this was who the people of Miklagard regarded as a Rider of the Great Dragon.

Hiccup tried a smile. Sizably, his teeth looked less prominent amidst the larger, surrounding features, but the crooked flash of white put lines in his face that seemed to transform him further. He could still see *himself* in there; an element of danger had simply been added.

Maybe...maybe he *could* accept this man as himself.

One day.
Hiccup didn't venture out of the palace for another three days. His back gave him quite a bit of trouble the day after the bath, and when he finally got around to admitting to Iason why he was so sore, the man added to his pain with a sharp rap to the head for straining the healing injury.

Hiccup stayed true to his therapy though, determined to get back in shape. While taken aback by how much he aged, he couldn't ignore the shallow areas of his body where his very flesh had been used to fuel his recovery. He wanted his mobility back to its full potential, and he walked and walked for as long as he were able each day, gaining a little more ground and adding to his stamina with every stroll.

This day, this grey, chilled day that would have been considered mild back in Berk, Hiccup decided to venture outside. It rained the night before, so the well-trampled streets were damp with mud and footprints, giving the patient plenty of obstacles to steer through as he took in the sights. He expected the looks that followed him but, without a dragon or an empress at his side, most were what lingered from a double take. Wearing more locally accepted clothes, and having a fresher, cleaner look to him, gave Hiccup enough obscurity to get through the morning bustle without drawing a crowd.

His dragon had not abandoned him. Toothless moved atop building roofs, slinking along tiles and wood and having a blast trying not to get spotted whilst out in broad daylight. Sometimes he would call down to Hiccup and try and get a reaction out of the boy.

'I found kittens!' or 'I think those females are staring at you' were the most common.

"Oi! Rider!"

Rider, Ippeas, Veho, Vsadnik, Călător—never was he referred to as 'Hiccup' in this city.

It wasn't Toothless who called down to him this time (granted, Toothless would never refer to him as such in the first place). No, every human ear in the vicinity could hear this voice that, quite successfully, destroyed what little anonymity Hiccup managed to hold onto until then.

The young man's shoulders seized at the familiar tone, and he turned with an exaggerated halt, intent on showing his annoyance at every given chance. His eyes fell upon Halvdan's hulking form shoving the odd, unfortunate individual out of his way. He was larger than most who surrounded him, so parting the crowd wasn't a problem, and before Hiccup could duck into the masses it he had an unwanted Viking at his hip.
"Where you headin'?" Halvdan asked, friendly as could be.

"By Odin, will you leave me alone?" Hiccup hissed, turning to continue his aimless journey through the crowd. Now that he had more attention than he ever desired, a clear path had formed, enhanced by the Væringjar next to him.

Hiccup dearly wished Toothless would spring down on top of the man, but the dragon, for once, was nowhere to be found.

"No can do," Halvan responded to Hiccup's complaint. "I told you, I was going to make things right again, so here I am."

"You can make things right by turning around and walking in the other direction."

"Don't be like that now, lad. Do you even know where you’re going?"

"Away from you. Stop following me."

Halvdan laughed deeply, as if Hiccup had told the funniest joke to ever grace the tables of Valhalla, and Hiccup was struck with a mad urge to take his dagger and stab the man in the kneecap. A lot of good it would do him, considering the last time it was sharpened—

Hiccup came to an abrupt stop, his head jerking around to face Halvdan.

"Do you have a blacksmith around here?"

Halvdan heartened considerately at Hiccup directing something other than contempt at him.

"'Course!" he said, brightly. "We got three—city this big, ‘n’ all. Though only one speaks Norse. Not to well but... take what you can get, I suppose. I can take you to him if—"

"Is he looking for an apprentice?" Hiccup broke in, unable to keep the eagerness from his voice. It would be the perfect way for him to bulk up while brushing up on skills he feared were rusting.
And possibly earn a little side cash. The rubies were still there, nothing had been taken from his belongings, amazingly, but the thought of acquiring more money never failed to brighten Hiccup's day.

Halvdan's smile slipped a bit at the other's clear intention.

"Ah, well, no. He's not got one...but he's not the nicest, either."

If Halvdan hoped to discourage such thoughts from brewing in Hiccup's head, he failed.

"Good," Hiccup declared. "Take me to him."

Mean he could deal with. All this worshipping was driving him 'round the bend.

Halvdan started off in another direction, Hiccup in tail, but the man continued in his cautioning.

"He's a Rus," Halvdan warned. "He's a downright grouch, he is."

"I'm a grouch to you, too,' Hiccup wanted to say, but instead asked, "What's a Rus?"

"What's a—oh! I mean he was part o' Væringjar, but got a bit too old, and now's taken up an old craft. He's part of a group that came from the north, but the other north, you know? Way out east."

Hiccup thought back on his map that he had scrutinized and refolded until the creases wore out some of the labels.

"Like around Novgorod?" he tried. Halvdan snapped his fingers.

"Aye, exactly—'round those parts. He pretends he don't know Norse just so he can yell at you in Russian. I'm telling you, kid, get whatever business you need done there and get out. Man's a lunatic."
"I take my chances," Hiccup rebuffed wryly.

::Lun-a-tic? Is that a type of insect?:

Hiccup faltered to a stumble and he looked skyward, finding a pair of lime-green eyes peeking down at him from over a roof's edge.

"Oh there you are!" Hiccup exclaimed, not bothering to be subtle now that he already had his own identity announced. "Where have you been?"

::I found a fish. See?: Toothless popped his head fully over the premise to show Hiccup the huge trout dangling from his mouth. ::Have you eaten?:

Hiccup was not impressed.

"You didn't find anything. You stole that!"

"Might do alright with the nutter, actually..." Hiccup heard Halvdan mutter, but it was easy enough to ignore.

::I don't have to steal:: Toothless argued, haughty as can be. ::People look at me and feel the need to give me stuff. And after that Mirror, I know why::

"Yeah," Hiccup scoffed, not buying a word of it. "It's called manipulation. I am not eating that."

::You should. You look hungry. I saved you the best one::

"Stall's right over there," Halvdan announced, his bushy, red eyebrows reaching towards his hairline as he jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "But if you prefer to stand there shoutin’ to the skies, that's okay by me."
"No, I think I'm done," Hiccup said, as if he were just browsing for a new belt and not engaged in a very public, one-sided argument. He turned back to the roof and for some added insurance yelled, "Don't you dare drop that on my head!"

Toothless flapped an ear plate at him.

::Relax. I already ate it::

And, remarkably, the fish was nowhere to be seen.

Shaking his head, Hiccup departed from the thickened crowed, leaving those that were once staring at him to admire the dragon instead.

"Can you really understand him?" Halvdan asked as they neared a tent-like structure posing as a smith shop. "Or is it just for show?"

Hiccup squinted at the very open stall. He could just make out a large shadow moving between hanging appliances and a barely-visible, bricked-in fire.

"Does it matter?" Hiccup was far too distracted to give much thought to Halvdan's question, especially considering the man would never believe him in the first place. Not only did Hiccup want to meet this apparently 'mean' Rus, but now Toothless brought his hunger to attention.

"Well...I personally believe it has to do with dragon magicks."

Hiccup suppressed an eye roll.

"Very few dragons have the magicks you're talking about, and Toothless isn't one of them."

"Did he tell you that?"

"Yes."
"'N' you believe him?"

"Yes."

"How do you know he didn't use his magicks to make you believe him?"

They had reached the most open side of the stall, where Halvdan gave the impression of delay, the first traces of nervousness Hiccup had yet to witness visible on his ruddy face.

Hiccup slapped a hand to the side of his face with theatric force.

"You're right! How could I not have considered such an insidious plan? It must have been his evil dragon magicks that made such an obvious conclusion slip my mind!"

Halvdan narrowed his eyes, abandoning his unease.

"I'm not sure how much more of your attitude I can tolerate."

Hiccup raised his chin and shrugged.

"Go then. *I'm nae sure how much more o' yer presence I can tolerate*," he mocked. Call him childish but he certainly enjoyed the way he finally got Halvdan to glower. It only took him three days.

"Oh, that is *it*, you—"

"Oi! Introoders! Vhat do you vant? Вы оскверняете мою кузню своей поганой иноzemной болтовней!"

A boulder of a man crept up on the both of them—a feat that should have been impossible by the sheer size of the undeniable blacksmith. The smith stood almost an entire head taller than Halvdan,
with a substantial gut and trunk-like arms. A wiry, blonde beard covered more of his face than skin was visible, and traveled down his throat and beneath his tunic; somewhere along the line it must have transformed into chest hair, but there was no distinct break revealing skin.

This man was just a step away from becoming a full-on, yellow bear.

"'Ello there, Demyan," Halvdan greeted with a respectful tip of his head. "This here is, ah, the Rider," Hiccup curled his lip— really? Did he really forget his name?— but Halvdan pretended he did nothing wrong. "He wanted to come here and see you..."

And then Halvdan had the audacity to look pleadingly for Hiccup to pick things up from there. Hiccup was reminded that Halvdan was a follower and, despite the man's own, impressive size, he would answer to anyone obviously more powerful than himself. No questioning, no fighting the system, just pure, Viking, pecking order.

Demyan turned heavy-lidded eyes onto the smaller being standing beside the Væringjar.

"I know, I know, who hay ees," Demyan grunted in barely articulate words. He appeared frustrated, and was most likely interrupted from a project going by the soot shining on his forehead and clinging to his hair, "Я лишь трачу свое время, слушая эту чушь—tayll may vhat you vant, now. Or leave!"

"I need my dagger sharpened," Hiccup announced in a clear voice. He faced down a sea serpent before; this man would not intimidate him. He pulled his blade from his belt, but held it just out of Demyan's reach when the smith went to grab for it. "However, I want to do it myself."

Demyan scowled; or, at least, Hiccup thought he was scowling. It was hard to tell with features that seemed permanently contorted in such an expression to begin with, but the already droopy cheeks turned downward in confusion.

"I not understand." Demyan looked at Halvdan for clarification. Halvdan grimaced.

"Ah, I'm not too sure meself..." He leaned into Hiccup. "Oi, this is a bad idea, kid."

"Stop," Hiccup ground out with deliberate slowness, "calling me 'kid'."
He swept his eyes briefly over to Halvdan when he spoke, but otherwise did not change his posture from Demyan—a dismissal tactic he picked up on from Toothless. It had the intended affect of silencing the Viking while giving the impression that, while his words were quite serious, he did not warrant Hiccup's full attention.

Hiccup couldn’t help analyzing things—he knew this about himself, and he stopped fighting it long ago. With Vikings being such a huge part of who he was, eventually breaking down Viking behavior would cross his mind one too many times to ignore.

It was only after he left Berk, and had the privilege of seeing Vikings from an outsider's point of view (arguably not being an outsider himself), that a general pattern among the hardheaded populace came to light. Showing the first sign of weakness was the equivalent of admitting to being a pushover, and any hope to be taken seriously, ever, would end there. Hiccup had been viewed as weak from day one in Berk, he never had a chance to make a stand, and every attempt to bring his views into light was like trying to stay afloat in a whirlpool long after a rescue ship had sailed.

But here—back in the company of Vikings that had no preconceptions of him—Hiccup had been nothing but ostentatious. It wasn't intentional at first; he simply reacted according to the situation. But he quickly realized that, by maintaining this attitude (helped greatly by lingering righteous anger and resentment), he could earn the agreement of the Vikings far more easily. The more stubborn his reputation, the less resistance he received to his ideas. And his wants.

Having a supercilious dragon at his back didn't hurt either. Of course, said dragon was, once again, not where Hiccup wanted him.

Example given: right behind him.

"I want to work for you," Hiccup reworded, drawing up as much stony determination as he could in his features.

Dark, grey eyes narrowed.

"Nyet."

No translation needed there. But Hiccup would not be deterred. He was getting his way on this, he didn't care how many times this Rus could break him in half. Now was the moment to build a
character to these Vikings—not in the Hippodrome, not in his speedy recovery, but here, in this smith stall, staring down a man that made members of the Væringjar nervous.

Hiccup just needed good footing, something that would give him a bit of leverage, like back with Arnulf. Once he got going, he could use his own form of intimidation—or bribing, whatever it would come to first.

"My dragon will take you to pieces if you don't." Always safe to start with his most obvious power.

Demyan snorted. "I see no dragon."

"You know I have one. You know who I am."

Name dropping?

"Not caring mooch," Demyan yawned. "I keel dragon and zen keel you for wasting time."

No go. Which left...

"I will pay you."

Demyan's heavy jaw shifted. A good sign.

"Ow much?"

"Ruby."

The long, caterpillar eyebrow waved as Demyan grunted, "I do not believe you."

"I'll show you," Hiccup quickly promised, pushing. "I'll bring it tomorrow for my first day as your apprentice. It won't be forever, either. I'll be leaving eventually."
The silence that followed was so stifling even Halvdan ceased his fidgeting. Hiccup met the Rus' frosty stare head on, not daring to blink or show the slightest sign of nervousness.


"Horosho!" Demyan barked, causing Halvdan to start and Hiccup's heart to lurch. "But you vill be sorry."

Hiccup's stomach flipped.

Victory. Victory.

He smiled, showing off every tooth that made Toothless nervous.

"You won't be," he promised, and the fact that he seemed so happy under the duress of such a terrifying man probably had Halvdan questioning whether Hiccup had recovered mentally, after all.

Hiccup turned on his heel and walked out, feeling energized, the smile ready to split his face. He didn't care if he just signed a death warrant. He got his way, against two Vikings. Granted he'd be down a ruby—and he *did* plan on paying—but nothing could beat the feeling of bringing his plans to fruition by his own power.

He was going to get his strength back—it would be hard, and he was sure Demyan would not be lenient on him for his 'delicate' condition, but it would happen.

He was going to learn how to make arrows. And he was going to use them with Framherja. And he was going to only impress Thor enough so that, hopefully, the god would lose interest in him without killing him.

Hiccup hadn't even needed Toothless at his back to scare the Vikings into agreeing with him.

In fact, Toothless was too busy sniping fish off a merchant's cart that was, unfortunately for the
merchant, stationed a bit too close to a heavily shadowed area between buildings.

"Oh, for the love of—Toothless, no!"

His sudden holler caused the merchant-turned-victim to first stare at Hiccup, and then follow his line of sight to the dark, triangular head that peeked from the laneway.

The vender shouted in surprise, though hardly any anger was present in his voice. Seeing a dragon's head sniffing fish would surely give anyone a scare, but after the initial shock wore off, an unsure smile wormed its way onto the man's face.

Hiccup shook his head. These reactions only encouraged Toothless.

He noticed the stares returning rather swiftly; it seemed for each new set of eyes that lay upon him or the dragon, another three would somehow follow. Hiccup already had two public conversations with Toothless in a short time span that, as usual, made him look like a 'nutter', as Halvdan put it. That Toothless no longer hid himself in the shade only served to attract more attention.

Surprisingly, Hiccup couldn't bring himself to care; a very good mood had struck, and he intended to hold onto it. His life had taken a turn for the bizarre, that was for sure, but he prided himself on being adaptable. If this was his life, he'd make it work until it changed again.

Though he enjoyed the positive attention, Toothless—much like Hiccup—preferred to be admired from afar. He snapped his teeth at his boy for giving away his position and, in a singular, impressive move, leapt onto the roof of the building he hugged.

Somewhere in Hiccup's mind, he wondered if Toothless had always been able to jump that high...and realized that, if he had, he would have been able to get out of the canyon back at their first meeting.

Weird.

::What was that for?:: Toothless growled down at him.
Hiccup's lips twitched at the now out-of-reach dragon.

"You're going to get fat if you keep this up," Hiccup replied, and started his journey back to his room, not bothering to see if Halvdan still followed.

Toothless reared his head back at the insinuation.

::What! I'm supposed to get this big!::

Wow, this conversation seemed familiar and backwards at the same time.

"You got rubies?"

And Halvdan was suddenly beside him, predictably asking about Hiccup's choice of payment and cutting into the private conversation.

"I count them before I sleep every night," Hiccup lied. It sounded more dangerous, anyway.

Halvdan looked shocked at the subtle accusation.

"I ain't got thoughts of stealing in my head!"

"Like you would dare," Hiccup muttered. He had seen Halvdan's true colors. He was sure the man was a terrifying sight to behold on the battlefield, but in the face of a more powerful ally, he bowed to the greater prowess.

"Can I see 'em?" the redhead asked.

If Halvdan thought he was following Hiccup all the way to his bedroom, he had another thing coming.
"No."

"Please?"

"You're ruining my good mood."

"I'll stop asking if you let me see them."

"No."

"I'm not going to stop."

"How old are you?"

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"Forty-two...forty-three...ha...forty-fffour..."

Hiccup counted in soft grunts, hardly above a whisper. His arms shook. His stomach muscles clenched and unclenched with each ascent from the floor. He kept his core tight, spreading the tension throughout as much of his body as he could to thin the strain. His arms stayed close to his sides, elbows tucked in, facing his hips, in a method to redirect the burden from his shoulders to his lower abdominal muscles.

Increasing his speed would surely be easier at reaching a higher number, but Hiccup had it drilled into his head that slow and steady did the trick for strengthening more effectively than quick, repetitive motions. A strong back started with a strong stomach, and, while most would think push-ups worked the arms, it was also a fantastic way to develop core strength. He couldn't do sit-ups yet; his back would not handle the varying pressure well. But by breathing correctly, as Domokos had shown him, and by knowing how to target certain muscles, he would be able to regain his strength without accidentally pushing back his progress.
As soon as he was strong enough, Framherja would be the first weapon his hands would wield. He ached to use her—something as beautiful as that bow should not spend its day collecting dust against a wall—but he'd be a fool to reverse all the work done by hurting himself right off the bat.

No. He needed to be smart about this. He needed a strong foundation to fall back on before attempting to operate a gift from the gods.

Toothless, locked in a comfy-looking curl, studied Hiccup's workout from the bed, his tail swishing in agitation.

::You're tired:: he mentioned when Hiccup's breathing became too heavy to ignore.

"Yeah—" Hiccup blew out in place of counting 'forty-seven'. He was starting to slow as well. He did forty-five yesterday. He wanted to make it to fifty today.

::You used to be able to do a lot more before getting tired::

And Toothless' morose observation was not helping Hiccup's morale. The boy finally dropped his knees to the floor and pushed back from his plank position to rest on his haunches.

"I used to be able to do a lot of things without getting tired," Hiccup lamented. Though he still found it unusual to feel the cool burn of his muscles so quickly, and he was thankful for being able to do this at all. Being bedridden for weeks on end had done wonders for his appreciation of free movement.

Regardless, while the progress was exciting, retraining was such a pain.

Toothless moaned, low and sad.

::Will you ever be able to do as many as you used to?::

"Yeah," Hiccup waved off. He was back on his feet. Rather than continuing his workout, he moved to the bed, flopping down next to Toothless and leaving his legs to dangle off the edge. His body sunk into the mattress and Hiccup closed his eyes, enjoying the sensation of weightlessness.
He could feel the strong breath of air that pushed against his face when Toothless brought his snout to his cheek.

::I'm sorry::

A small smile tugged at the corner of Hiccup's lips. He didn't open his eyes.

"Sorry? For what?"

::For what happened to you. I don't know if I said it before::

The smile was gone. Hiccup opened his eyes and kept them focused on the ceiling rather than looking at his dragon.

"You didn't have to."

Never in a million years would Hiccup blame Toothless. He 'drew first blood', so to speak; he would never have the right to be angry at the dragon for injuries on his behalf. Not for as long as Toothless' tail was lopsided, and not for long after that.

::None of this should have happened::

"I wanted to come here," Hiccup reminded him. "I got us into this situation."

::I could have said something:: Toothless argued in like. ::I didn't. And I didn't fight hard enough when they had you brought out in that death-area::

"You were injured too." Hiccup started to feel the first tendrils of annoyance towards Toothless and his sudden, uncharacteristic show of remorse. It was so delayed, so out of place after Hiccup had already come to terms with what happened as a most unfortunate punishment for being lackadaisical.
His impatience must have seeped through his words, because Toothless lowered his head to come to a final rest on Hiccup's chest.

Hiccup's heartbeat had always been quicker than his own—far quicker—but prominent within the smaller body. It never ceased to amaze Toothless that such a small being could drum with so much life.

::I think I'm just realizing now what you gave up::

And he never ceased to underestimate human recovery. This whole experience didn't just affect Hiccup's body, it affected his mind. It made him sad for much too long. Angry and bitter.

Hiccup brought one arm up to pillow his head, as his other stroked the scales of Toothless' brow.

"You can't always be the one saving me, buddy. I will get back to normal and, this time, I'll need to be stronger than before."

Toothless purred at the touch, returning the comforting gesture with warm vibrations.

::I always thought you were fine the way you were::

"I know. I didn't think so."

::Do you like who you are now?::

Hiccup paused before answering honestly, "I'm getting there."

"I-eh hope I am not interrupting anything?"

Both boys lifted their heads and turned towards the door like synchronized puppets. Hiccup had only met her once, but he could immediately recognize the woman as Theodora, Zoe's sister.
Royalty in the room.

Hiccup sat up fully.

"Oh, no, no!" He bounced off the bed with a nervous chuckle, standing up straight in her presence. "We were just resting!"

She smiled, benign yet guarded, and stepped fully into the light-flooded space. The net of gold chains shawled over her head jingled faintly with each, light step.

Theodora did not have her sister's beauty; in fact, even without the comparison she was rather plain looking. But, from what Hiccup heard through half-hushed murmurs, she possessed the wit that Zoe lacked.

"Can I help you with anything?" Hiccup asked awkwardly. He tried not to fidget. He was only garbed in braies, showing off the damage done to his physique nicely. Not the best attire befitting of encountering royalty, especially when the woman wore patterns of dramatic colors and expensive jewels to better contrast his lack of dress.

"Oh no," she answered, demurely. "I-eh, only came to see how you were liking it here. I heard the rumor that you are now apprenticing to the-eh blacksmith."

Her Norse was better than her sister's, with a lighter accent.

"Yes, yes I am."

"That is good to keep busy. But does it bother you, being around the Guard?"

Hiccup shared a quick look with Toothless. No one before had ever brought up any possible discomfort on his behalf for being in so much contact with the people who hurt him. Not even the empress.

"I'll be okay," Hiccup responded once he got his jaw working. Theodora had a similar "game-face" as her sister, but already Hiccup gleaned an entirely different person from beneath that carefully
controlled exterior.

The woman smiled—another, partially forced one that told Hiccup the sensibility came with a lack of easiness shown in Zoe.

"How long are you-eh planning to stay?" Theodora asked with innocent inquiry.

"Until I'm better I guess," Hiccup shrugged. He looked down at himself, at the depressions between ribs. "I still have quite a ways to go."

"Yes, I can see that," Theodora commented. "Concerning your time here: I-eh came to warn you. A shift in power may occur again. It would be best to be on your guard."

Hiccup took an involuntary step backward, astonished at such compelling information given so freely.

"Is your sister losing the throne?" he asked.

A usurpation? A natural passing of power? Or was it a threat? A threat that her sister may die soon—by accident or nature? Or, perhaps a threat had already occurred? Maybe an outside source made it known that a change in power would be forced upon Miklagard.

If so, had he and Toothless and the sensation they caused be indirectly behind it?

Theodora opened her mouth to answer, but a sharp voice cut across the room.

"Theodora!" Zoe snapped, barely keeping her voice at a reasonable volume. Seeing as she had the effect of ceasing their conversation, whilst garnering their attention, the empress continued in a far, more delicate tone, 'Η παρουσία σου είναι απαραίτητη αλλού."

Theodora pursed her lips, hesitating for only a moment under Zoe's piercing stare, before abruptly departing with a demure nod in Hiccup's direction. She turned using graceful, almost inhumanly fluid motions that must have taken decades of training to perfect, and exited the room.
Time seemed to slow as she passed her sister; the two women engaged in a silent battle of wills while caught beneath the doorframe. A pressure permeated from the pair, affecting even Hiccup, who his breath, almost positive one may hit the other.

And then Theordora's feet continued her departure and the tension broke.

Hiccup stared, mouth slightly ajar, and wondered if that had actually happened. Did they...hate each other?

"Theodora is extremely busy," Zoe said in a cool tone she had yet to use on him. "Please, do not bother her again."

Hiccup nearly replied that she had come to his room but, a blink later, and Zoe had suddenly been replaced by Halvdan.

Wait...what?

Halvdan stood in the doorway, managing to take up a good chunk of the space between frames while glancing out and down the hall, where the empress must have followed her sister.

He whistled lowly.

"Trouble in the castle," he murmured, still following the wake of the princesses with his eyes. He turned back to Hiccup, arms crossed and mouth open, prepared to say something when his eyes bugged out of his head.

"Were you really wearing that?" he choked in a poorly concealed laugh. "In front of them?"

"Yep," Hiccup quipped with half-lidded eyes. Nothing he could really do about it. Besides, it wasn't like he was naked.

Still chortling, Halvdan took a few steps into the room.
"Well, I came to ask if you wanted to go for a run. See how that back's treating you."

Hiccup shrugged. A light jog would give him a good judge of where he stood in his recovery, as long as he didn't push himself too far.

"Sure." And he immediately set to scrounging around for clothes.

"How's that smith job goin'?" Halvdan started with his usual small talk attempts.

"Good," Hiccup insisted as he pulled on one of the many tunics gifted to him by the empire. He would never admit to the several near-accidents that seemed to happen around him, all of which he suspected were caused by Demyan. On more than one occasion, Hiccup was forced to loudly announce how no one would get any rubies if he died on the job. "I'm making arrows tomorrow. We'll test them out then."

Perhaps Halvdan knew a thing or two about smithing, because he looked rather impressed.

"Already? Does Demyan know this?"

Hiccup grinned; the first honest smile he ever gave to the insistent Viking.

"He will."

A week passed since Hiccup announced the start of his new project. It actually took him three days to convince Demyan to teach him the craft, and another four until he was satisfied with his results. He had burns running up and down his arms from his challenging apprenticeship, shiny flecks that brought him more nostalgia than pain. Demyan made the job more dangerous than it needed to be, as if testing Hiccup in more than just skill, but Hiccup relished in the absolute contrast of the environment to life outside the workspace.
Three weeks had passed since he started walking longer distances. Two since he started seriously retraining himself. And now, at the very end of Ýlir, on this grey, overcast day, Hiccup felt ready to try out Framherja.

He moved through the streets with Halvdan at his side and Framherja against his back. It was impossible to unstring her—some supernatural element kept her line taut and frame strong.

Toothless followed in his usual lofty fashion, occasionally using his wings to glide to a different rooftop rather than leaping, drawing up a good batch of delighted 'Oooo's each time.

Hiccup had, at long last, come to the conclusion that, if there were any Viking he would 'get along' with, it would be Halvdan. And not because he particularly liked the guy—there were too many faults with Halvdan to name—but because not getting along with him was like deciding to develop an aversion to his own shadow.

He wouldn't truly 'get along' with Halvdan until he gave the man a shiner so bright people would see it in the dark. Just one, good, solid hit to the face; then they would be even. Sort of.

He'd have to hit him extra hard.

Harald mentioned bringing Hiccup around to sparring now that he gained enough mobility, and Hiccup planned on getting nice and strong before repaying Halvdan for striking him at their first meeting.

Then, and only then, would he consider the man a...an associate.

Still, Hiccup felt comfortable enough around the Viking not to keep up the irritated façade all the time.

"What is up with the sisters?" he asked, breaking the brief and rare silence that fell between the two as they travelled toward the Hippodrome.

Really, Hiccup should have known Vikings wouldn't have been sensitive to any lingering insecurities he felt about the place. Fortunately, Hiccup thought it would be good for him to face
down the arena. His last memories of the place, in fact, were not bad...

"Jealousy issue is the crux of it," Halvdan replied, not needing to ask which sisters Hiccup referred to. "Empress Zoe's got the power and the birthright, but Theodora's got the political know-how. Empress' always been prettier, that's for sure, and she's gotten everythin' for it...but she knows—and we know—that Theodora would be a better leader. It's the knowin' that's the problem, you see?"

"If Theodora'd be a better leader, why wouldn't Zoe step down for the sake of the empire?" Or was self-sacrifice a foreign concept to these people?

Halvdan laughed, and this one echoed more hollowly, lacking his usual bluster.

"The empress would never let that happen if she could help it! 'Sides. She can't go and change her hold over things now. She's had Theodora held down for almost as long as she's been in power. Theodora's been under surveillance for most of her life, usually banished to a convent or some such place..."

Hiccup furrowed his brow. This sounded a bit too...malicious for the woman who adored Toothless so much.

"Zoe would do that?" he questioned, his disbelief palpable.

Halvdan looked down, annoyed.

"Stop callin' her 'Zoe' like you're on a first-name basis with her. You obviously don't know her that well if you're shocked. She went and killed her first husband, for Christ's sake. Bet you didn't know that."

"What!" Hiccup hardly paid heed to the road anymore. Halvdan had his full attention.

"Aye," Halvdan nodded. "Found dead in his bath. And it weren't drowning that did it, neither. Second one was blinded and sent to a monastery." Halvdan seemed to enjoy Hiccup's growing horror. "Now it's her nephew that's the technical ruler—or was. See, he didn't trust her after her history with disposing emperors, and tried to banish her the way she banished her sister. Didn’t turn out so good. People got real mad about that.
"She's back now. More popular than ever, and a lot of thanks goes to you and your dragon. Michael the fifth is pretty much booted from the throne for trying to pull that stunt."

"I...had no idea..." Hiccup mumbled. He knew Zoe wasn't all that fond of him as a *person*, and he could tell, plain as day, she enjoyed the publicity he and Toothless dredged up for her, but that she was so...*underhanded* was something he had not foreseen.

Halvdan nodded.

"But the real kicker is—and its why the ladies have been so cold to each other—is that the court finally sees that the empress isn't going to improve her, ah, tactics. If she don't find a new emperor to rule along side of her, she may have to grant Theodora more power and make her co-ruler. As you can imagine, the Empress' don't like *that* idea too much."

"Yeah," Hiccup muttered. His entire view of the woman had been flipped within a single, short walk.

"...And now she's got her eye on Harald—"

Hiccup's head snapped up.

"What?" he must have heard wrong. "Zoe—I mean, the empress wants to marry Harald?"

Harald wasn't as young as Halvdan, but he was far younger than Zoe. It would be an...unusual match, to say the least.

"Aye. But Harald's not stupid. No man in his right mind would get involved with *that* woman—title of Emperor's not worth it." Halvdan dug his fingers into his beard, scratching at the skin beneath the hair with a rough 'skritch'ing sound. "He actually has his eye on the empress' niece—forgot her name—but the empress knows this, so she's pissed about that..."

Hiccup shook his head. He didn't care to hear much more about the drama that went on within the palace walls, as long as it didn't directly affect him.
"So, I should trust Theodora over Zoe?" he needed a clear direction on where to keep his eyes if he planned on sleeping in that palace any longer.

Not that anyone could get near him with Toothless snoozing at his side.

Halvdan sneered at the idea, an expression lost within the shadows that wiped over their crossing into the Hippodrome.

"If Theodora showed an interest in you its to help get out from under the Empress' thumb. She needs her own leverage if the co-ruling don't work out. No, lad. My advice? Don't trust anyone in that palace. Hell, yeh shouldn't trust women in the first place." Halvdan paused, the weak sun shining on them once more, allowing Hiccup to see the calculating look given to him. "Say...how old are yeh?

Hiccup shrunk back, not liking the gleam in the man's eye.

"Why," he asked, wary.

"Too long enough!"

They had reached the arena without Hiccup even realizing, and now he found himself face-to-distant-face with Harald.

The blond, armored man stood by a crafted target—a rounded pad of cloth stuffed with cotton and hay, concentric circles painted down to the center in a bullseye.

"Oi! We're here aren't we?" Halvdan grinned back. "Now, let's see this baby in action!"

Hiccup only cast Halvdan an annoyed look for his excessive enthusiasm (only he should be this excited), and unslung the golden bow. Harald approached the pair, planning on shortening the gap that separated them, but before he could get within five faðmr of Hiccup, a dark-winged form dropped down to separate them.
Toothless curled his lip at Harald, determined that a maximum proximity had been reached.

Halvdan had apologized but Harald still refused. That meant, by Toothless’ account, that a certain distance must always be maintained between his human and the Viking.

Hiccup, for his part, wasn’t happy about Harald being present for this moment—a moment he considered rather special and more than anticipated—but as soon as his recovery started to pick up speed, Harald had taken to keeping tabs on him. He almost became as annoying as Halvdan with how he would pop up at every opportunity, asking if Hiccup felt ready to try out the bow.

Hiccup agreed to the man’s witnessing his first test of it on the condition that Harald promise to help train Hiccup to his full potential, and that no one else was present.

He long stopped caring about what Halvdan did.

Unless Halvdan did something stupid like pull an arrow from the satchel slung over his other shoulder—one that he purchased a while ago, made with hardened leather and quite durable.

"You made these?" Halvdan asked, dragging his finger over the smooth, flat side of the head, openly impressed. "Not bad... not bad at'all."

Instead of saying 'thanks' to the compliment, Hiccup snatched it from the large hand, eyes narrowed at the gall of the man.

"Don't touch."

"Want to move closer?" Harald asked. Hiccup was sure Harald didn't mean it as an insult when he gestured to the well-distanced target, but his lip pulled back at the implication.

He wasn't that handicapped!

Harald held up his hands.
"Fine, fine. Just thought you might want a closer target after..."

::The next closest target is you:: Toothless informed him, knowing too well that it went unheard. So long as it brought a smile to Hiccup's face, he'd be fine with that.

And, indeed, Hiccup smiled, giving the dragon a good scratch on the neck before squaring off to the target. He had practiced drawing the bow without arrows a couple times to test his limitations. It fit perfectly in his grip, a bone-ring not even necessary with a string that, impossibly, didn't hurt him.

Even when not in peak physical condition, Hiccup would make arrows fly with this bow.

He nocked the arrow Halvdan so thoughtfully chose for him. Despite the care and effort that went into crafting the shaft and head, it just didn't measure up to the beauty of Framherja. No arrow would, sadly.

Hiccup dragged the taut string back by the crook of his thumb, something electrifying budded in his chest as excitement welled—he was here, he was doing this, finally!—and, just as he reached the peak of his draw, an instant before he released the projectile that he put so much effort into crafting, the arrow burst into flames.

Hiccup yelped at the sudden flash of light and the intense heat around his fingers and cheek. He hardly heard the other cries of alarm as he dropped Framherja. The weapon thudded to the ground, not a scratch or burn on it, as innocent and beautiful as always beneath the dusting of the arrow's ashen remains.

"What..." Hiccup gasped.

"...the Hell..." murmured Halvdan.

:::::was that:::::

Chapter End Notes
A/N: Framherja! Y U b so bad?

Hiccup's on a BIG attitude kick (okay, so he's nearly seventeen), it's more or less a phase, aided greatly by being surrounded by people that piss him off. I think FjordMustang put it best when she pretty much described Halvdan as a jackass Viking version of Flanders from the Simpsons.

I had fun writing this (seriously giggling in my bed as I wrote Hiccup), and I hope it made up for last chapter. Aaaand, its extra long :)

Next chapter is going to be even more fun to write for me.

A BIG thanks to Setsuno for translating the Russian. Thank you so much!

Thanks to SirNick for betaing! (even though I just decided to add this last scene at the last moment... –imsobad-

And thank you for reading!

Annoyed with Halvdan? Scared of Demyan? Wtfing at Framherja?

Let me know what you think!
Courted

Chapter Summary

Hiccup adapts to life in Miklagard and struggles to unlock Framherja's secret. He also gets pursued ;)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Courted

"And then—and then—it exploded! Right in his face! I'm talkin' little slivers stickn' outta his chin like a porcupine's rear-end!"

Hiccup sighed as laugh roared trailing Halvdan's greatly exaggerated account of Framherja's temperament. His face itched and he wanted to rub the area that still bore raw, red scars from the splintered shoot of a former arrow. At this point, Hiccup was certain he bore more scars from self-inflicted accidents than anyone he knew.

Halvdan regaled his fellows with tales not of Hiccup's first failed test of Framherja, but of his seventh...or eighth. They were starting to blur together at this point. Naturally, Hiccup tried a few more arrows after the first burst into flame, all of which met the same fiery fate. The weeks that followed the initial failure consisted of Hiccup experimenting in the forge with different materials, trying to create a projectile that would please the testy weapon—almost all of which were destroyed before he could draw the string to its limit.

It was frustrating, to say the least. He felt let down, challenged, annoyed, and cheated. Sometimes he wanted to shake Framherja, especially the times that left him in pain, but the fear of Thor's reaction to such mistreatment kept his frustrations contained.

...Aside from dropping her time and time again.

He wouldn’t give up. A month of failed experiments had surely put a damper on his spirits, but it also drove him to obtain the answer. It always did.

Hiccup even once made an arrow of iron ore, thinking Framherja wanted a material to better match her element. For one, wonderful moment Hiccup believed it would work because the arrow did not immediately catch fire or explode.

It melted.

By reaction, Hiccup dropped everything in his grasp as soon as the unbearable burn—straight through the gloves—registered in his fingers, but the damage had been done. His hands needed the immediate care of Iason who, upon hearing the full details of what happened, nearly strangled Hiccup with the rest of the bandage roll.

He probably would have, too, had Toothless not been watching the healer with a sharp eye.

A good week passed since Hiccup made his latest attempt at firing; the pain and fate of the iron
arrow discouraged him from further testing for the time being. At least until his hands healed. In the
meantime, he did what he could in the forge—even if the heat and of the place only served to agitate
the healing burns further.

Hiccup feared he would have to make an arrow of gold to appease Framherja. Sure, the materials
would be given to him if he sent Toothless with the request, but at present time, further attempts with
metals sounded rather unappealing. Gold was softer, easily malleable, but that much more likely to
turn into molten *pain*.

Hiccup absently pouted at the fingers recently freed from their bandages. He wanted to pick at the
blisters but Iason made it quite clear he was to do no such thing. Apparently they were necessary?

Framherja may not even be made of gold. She was probably just shiny.

Hiccup snorted at his own, private reasoning. If that were the case, then making gold arrows would
be just as much a waste of time as the rest were. He had other things he could be doing...

The young man tipped the last of his undersized drink into his mouth. The alcohol lost its flavor a
while ago; now it just felt smooth and warm down his throat. He had taken a shining to this amber
liquid. The first few sips from the tiny glass were so bitter it bit at the back of his tongue and throat.  
But he continued drinking, not liking the way Halvdan watched him, grinning, as if issuing a silent
challenge. A second glass was soon presented to him, and Hiccup downed it in one go as he saw the
other Vikings do with theirs. His throat still ached from the first one, and the second managed to slide
on by under the camouflage of its predecessor.

Hiccup's head felt a little warm and his body relaxed, so his third glass he sipped like the first. He
would not lose his head around people like this, no matter how accustomed to them he grew.

The alcohol (*Raki? Raji? He couldn't quite recall...*) made his present company more bearable, but
only just. After much pestering Halvdan finally managed to drag Hiccup into his most frequented
tavern. Truthfully, Hiccup felt like he could use a drink, and only held off for as long as he did
because he didn't want to give the obtuse man the illusion that they were friends.

This particular tavern turned out to be a favorite for many Væringjar, run by immigrant Norsemen
where no language barrier kept a man from getting his drink on. The inside was decorated in rough,
polished oaks, and the lack of windows and glut of candles gave the warm, stodgy feeling of home
in the middle of a foreign land.

On any other day, Hiccup would have enjoyed the setting. Being surrounded by Vikings, with no
desire to restrict their drinking as he had, spoiled the comfort of the situation.

A meaty hand tipped in grime-crusted nails slammed on the varnished table next to Hiccup's drink,
shocking the liquid into harsh ripples.

Hiccup trailed his eyes up the arm and onto the face of a familiar, but nameless Viking. The man's
eyes were slightly unfocused and the curls of his thick beard glistened with dribbled booze.

"So—so—you cannot even *use* that bow?" he asked, confident he had Hiccup's full attention. "After
all you did to get it?"

The man's breath wafted across the table and Hiccup, wrinkling his nose, pulled his drink back into
the safety of his hands.

"I can still use it," he insisted, pausing for a sip. He needed it. "I can hit you across the head with it
and your brain will be fried before you ever knew it was there."
"Ah," the Viking blinked, completely missing the insult thrown in at the end. "Yeah...g'd point, that..."

Hiccup didn't know if the man was simply dimwitted, or if the alcohol consumption affected his mind that much.

"Oi," Halvdan piped in from Hiccup's left. "You wouldn't have gotten that bow if you didn't come here. Remember that."

"I wouldn't have gotten a lot of things if I didn't come here," Hiccup pointed out darkly. Usually such reminders would earn him a brief, but satisfying, look of shame from the redhead. Unfortunately, Halvdan had plenty to drink as well, and he grinned cheekily in reply. A bit put out, Hiccup added, "Besides, you don't know that I wouldn't have gotten it. It could have been presented to me at any time."

"Naaah..." Halvdan dismissed. He made a waving motion with his hand, but miscalculated his control over it, coming within a hair's breadth of knocking over some other Viking's drink.

"It's a weapon of fate, that bow. Time and place matter," he looked rather self important in that moment, nodding to himself as though he were delivering very wise information. "You were meant to come here so you could get that bow. Simple as that."

"I don't agree," Hiccup intoned. He glanced down at the bottom of his drink, a touch dismayed. He supposed he could get one more in him and still be fine...

Halvdan looked scandalized.

"How can you not agree? The fates brought you here!"

"My dragon brought me here."

"You steered the dragon here," Halvdan corrected. As if he knew anything.

"We both decided to come here." Hiccup was starting to get annoyed. Where was that damn barkeep?

"Why?" Halvdan asked, bluntly.

"Huh?" Hiccup murmured, still distracted

"Why did you want to come here?" he asked again. "The sites? The ladies? The cats? OI! BARKEEP! GET OVER HERE AND GET US ANOTHER ROUND!"

Hiccup jumped at the sheer volume Halvdan managed to acquire so quickly. A moment later and the elusive tavern owner was at their table, refreshing the empty glasses.

So that's how it was done...

"No," Hiccup answered the man, considerably more willing now that Halvdan helped him out. "My mother grew up here. I wanted to see how she spent her childhood."

"Ah!" Halvdan said, picking his own glass. "Seekin' out old family members?"

Hiccup shook his head.

"No, no. She traveled pretty much her whole life, but her family spent most of her childhood here..."
Hiccup trailed off, as a bizarre, but obvious, realization wormed its way through the weight of alcohol clouding his mind and struck him right behind the eyes.

For the first time, it occurred to him that someone might remember her. Someone still in Miklagard.

"Valka?" He blurted out quickly, unstoppably. "That was her name. Do you know her?"

Halvdan put no thought into the question.

"Mmm...nope! Oi, guys!" he hollered above the din. Of the mess of squabbling Vikings, half turned to give their attention, the rest falling to their drinks. Hiccup could feel his face heat and an unnatural squeak escaped his throat. Why was Halvdan dragging everyone into this? He only asked him. Surely, he wouldn't— "Any of you fools remember a Valkaralka?"

"Shut up!" Hiccup hissed. "It's Valka—"

The immediate, surrounding attention they received cut off the rest of his words.

"No," one Viking spoke up. "Is that a woman?"

"O'course!" Another piped in. "That's a woman's name, innit? Yeh, chanty wrassler!"

A cluster of voices followed, amplifying.

"Sounds a lot like Valkyrie... She a Valkyrie?"

"She sounds like a fine woman."

"Fine, fine woman."

"Sounds like she got curves."

"Chebs! Big, squishy chebs!"

"I like a curvy girl, meself. Let's find her."

"I always wanted tae try me a Valkyrie—"

"It's my mother," Hiccup snapped before they trod on territory he, as her son, should never be subjected to.

"Yer mother's a Valkyrie?" a lone, stupid voice broke through, and it all went to Hel from there.

"That's right! He got that bow from Thor!"

"Bleedin' troll bawbags!"

"That's why he's alive!"

"An immortal?"

"Can I touch 'im?"

"Why didn't we figure this before now?"

"Why did I convert? I could have heirs with a Valkyrie!"
Hiccup knocked back the rest of his drink and turned to Halvdan, who looked positively delighted at this development.

"I hate you," Hiccup coughed, overestimating his tolerance of the liquid.

"Well, is it true?" Halvdan asked, half serious.

Hiccup answered him with a full glare. Somehow, in all the inane commotion more drinks had appeared. Hiccup gladly grabbed the next one. Just one more. He'd be fine.

Toasts began popping up around them.

"To valkyries!"

"To th' Empress!"

"To Basil!"

"Basil!" another wailed, sloshing more of his drink out of the cup than was left in it. "Aye! To Basil!"

"Do I even want to ask what Basil is?" Hiccup muttered to the man-who-he-was-still-annoyed-with.

"Ah, that'd be the emperor before Empress Zoe," Halvdan answered, scratching at his ear. "Wasn't around for much of his rule meself but—"

"He knew how to run a bleedin' country, he did!" one Viking shouted. He slammed his hand on the table—Hiccup suspected it was the same one who did the table slapping before, but they were all starting to look alike.

"No truer statement," agreed another voice.

"Basil—Basil was a great man," a different Viking told Hiccup solemnly, appearing at his right. "A great, great man."

"Ninnies," Havldan snorted. "Though I suppose they have a point; the empire's just holding form—but only just. 'Pparently Basil had no heirs of his own and, well, things just get messy when there're no heirs around."

Hiccup nodded absently, trying not to think of the situation he left his father in. The setting wasn't helping. He felt like he could stand up from the crowd and find himself back in the Mead Hall. Maybe it was time to get out of there before some sick form of nostalgia took hold of him.

"Supposedly, Basil set the standard for employers," Halvdan went on, heedless to Hiccup's thoughts. "Harald's been saying for ages that it was time to get outta here. When the emperor changes, part of our agreement is we get to raid the treasury. I think he's been waiting for Zoe to et kicked out or step down or leave, or summat. Wants to take advantage of all his time put in here. 'Course, these days, I think his patience's wearing a bit thin. He's been getting more and more ballsy. Just right now he's with that girl...that...eh..."

"I don't know "that" girl," Hiccup told him. He didn't care how off Harald's behavior was; the only thing that interested him was another allusion to a new emperor. It sounded like things might get messy if something happened to Zoe's position, and spending more time on getting Toothless' flying gear into shape sounded like a better and better plan.
"Oi, what's her name again?" Halvdan called to the Vikings who were toasting Odin-knows-what at this point. Once again bringing them, unnecessarily, into the conversation.

"Who?"

"The girl Harald's with right now!"

There was a round of 'ahh's and much nudging before someone answered:

"Marcey, I think."

"Maria, you lummock, it's Maria!"

"Ah, Maria, that's it," Halvdan recalled, brightly. He turned back to Hiccup, "He's with Zoe's niece Maria. Like's her a fair bit, he does. She's a pretty thing, I can see the attraction. Like a bigger woman, meself...particularly round the hips—"

"Um..." Hiccup felt a bit uncomfortable on the subject of who Harald was with but something struck him as odd. "Doesn't Zoe want to marry him or something?"

Harald hit the table with his palm, a buoyant laugh escaping his lips.

"That's the kicker, innit? He don't want her, he wants her niece. She does what she can to separate them, but, as you can imagine, that don't do much to discourage things. Harald's already threatened to run off with the lass if Zoe didn't stop interfering with his business..."

Hiccup's eyebrows rose, the drink that he lifted falling a bit from lips. That sounded like a serious attitude to him. To say something like *that* to an empress...

Halvdan's hand came down and slapped him on the shoulder, "I bet you could grab any girl you want and just fly off with her!"

The "affectionate" tap jerked Hiccup, and some of his drink escaped from its container, splashing onto the table in several droplets. Hiccup stared at the liquid, realizing, somewhere in the back of his mind, that he should be more upset at how upset he was over the loss of the drink.

"But, I wouldn't *want* to do that," Hiccup pointed out, mentally cringing at the thought. "That would be...troublesome."

Halvdan rolled his eyes.

"We'll not to keep her obviously. You'd just be able to snatch her up for however long you needed her and just drop her back in the middle of the night."

Hiccup knew he must have bore a vaguely horrified look on his face because Halvdan began waving his hands in the air, hollering: "Consensual! Consensual!"

The man had no concept of volume control.

Hiccup took a long inhale through his nose, regretting it as soon as a scent that could only be described as 'sloppy' invaded his senses.

"Regardless of what I am *capable* of doing, I have no desire to snatch her from anywhere for any period of time."

Sweet Freyja, he had just created a hypothetical girl with Halvdan. It was time to leave. It was *so*
time to leave.

Halvdan snorted at Hiccup's avowal.

"'Course you do, you ponce. Yeh...Oh...oh no..."

The man had gone from cocky to appalled in the time it took Hiccup to swallow a mouthful of his drink.

"What now," Hiccup sighed, not really caring for any more theatrics.

Halvdan turned fully to face him, his visage the epitome of grim.

"How old are you?" Halvdan asked the question with such seriousness that Hiccup felt compelled to answer.

"Nearly seventeen."

He started to feel offset by Halvdan's ever changing manners.

"And you have never experienced a woman?"

Hiccup, who had been ready for another sip of his drink, lurched forward, slamming the bottom of the glass into the table.

"What?" His voice cracked. It hadn't cracked in ages.

"You are not a man yet!" Halvdan announced, louder, pointing an accusing finger at Hiccup on top of it all. Hiccup immediately slapped the hand down.

"Shut up!" he hissed. How did this happen? How? "Oh...G-gods...can we not go there?"

Halvdan could no longer hear the younger man, lost to his own disbelieving grumbles.

"You ride a dragon—how can you not—?"

"Just shut up!" Hiccup snapped. "It's not any of your business. Who cares?"

He tried to keep the flush from his cheeks, but the alcohol had already opened the floodgates for extreme blushing.

"I said I'd do right by you," Halvdan muttered, shaking his head in disgruntlement. He stood up, abruptly, sending the bench back with a loud screech. "Unbelievable...on the road...all'ver the world... and still..."

Hiccup didn't know what to do; he'd never seen Halvdan this serious before.

"I—that—"

Halvdan spun, once again pointing his thick finger in Hiccup's face.

"You. Stay put."

Hiccup was too mortified to do anything. He watched, mute, as Halvdan marched off into a thicker area of the tavern, then let out a long breath.

While he never planned on letting anyone know of his experience—or lack there of—he certainly
didn't expect a reaction of that magnitude. Certainly not from Halvdan.

Hiccup shook his head, throwing from his mind that hated sense of inadequacy. Who cares what Halvdan thought? Yes, he was on the road, but that made it all the more unlikely he would find someone to...

Hiccup sighed again, rubbing his forehead. He couldn't bring himself to shack up with a random woman, simply for bragging rights. True, he didn't find the thought of marriage appealing at all and, on more than one occasion, wondered if he'd ever gain more experience with women than kisses in an otherworldly dimension. He tried (in increasing frequency) to avoid thoughts of that nature, tried to make it a habit; he was travelling with a dragon, and while male, Toothless still had a lot to learn about humans.

The disaccorded and grating hubbub of drunken Vikings singing finally reached a level that broke through his maddening thoughts.

"-We are loyal warriors
That's the oath we gave
To protect the emperor
Even to a violent grave-

Hiccup raised an eyebrow, watching as these men threw their menacing images to the wind and swayed as they sang, arms around shoulders and tankards held high in the air.

"-Our loyalty was always firm
We kept our given word
On these southern battlefields
Our northern war cries roared-

Hiccup looked around the adjoining tables. Those who weren't singing drunkenly were passed out, foreheads pressed against the grains and open mouths drooling alcohol-seasoned saliva.

One man blubbered in a corner, still going on about Basil.

"-Battles have been fought
Many gave their lives
But all who died by axe and sword
Were called to hall up high-

If this is what Valhalla is like...he'd be okay in Hel.

"-Our time here
Is now at end
Can't help but reminisce-"
Right. It was time to leave.

"A cold spring day

*So long ago

*When we set out to sea-

"Oi, Rider!"

Hiccup knocked back the rest of his glass, and slammed its empty shell down so hard it jolted a neighboring Viking out of his alcohol-induced slumber.

He spun in his seat, one leg over the bench, standing.

"I'm *not*—!"

Girls.

His voice died in his throat before he registered anything else because, somehow, he instinctively knew he didn't want to be shouting into the face of the two women standing well within arms' reach of his body.

Certainly not after drinking so much alcohol.

Halvdan's *stupid*, cheery face hovered over the pair of ladies' heads like a bad omen. The alcohol made itself known with a vengeance as soon as his equilibrium changed. Dizziness clamped over his head like a vise and he had to press a hand firmly to the table to keep from toppling over. His face felt hot—and he swore it was the drink, not the girls encroaching on his personal space—and Hiccup knew for a fact that he *did* have hands and feet, even if he couldn't feel them at the present moment.

"I'd like you to meet Doris," Halvdan pointed to the taller woman with dark, curly hair tied up in several head rings, "and Hagne." The other woman, Hagne, had her head covered with a shawl with just the bare whips of brown hair peaking out. Her face lacked Doris' initial beauty, but her eyes were dark and intense and Hiccup felt intimately exposed with the way she leveled her stare at him.

"Neither speak Norse," Halvdan continued, "And they both know you as the Mysterious Dragon Rider. You're all set!"

Hiccup blinked, moving his eyes from Doris' wide, predatory smile and onto Halvdan's.

"What?" he asked dumbly. If he had just said 'no' to those last couple of drinks he would have understood immediately and not have things explained to him by a *Viking*. Hel, if he had said 'no', he wouldn't even be in this situation.

Halvdan had a hand on either girl's shoulder, possibly responsible for keeping them at such a close proximity to him. Hiccup suspected he was leaning backward in a subtle arch, but perspectives remained a bit distorted.

"I explained the situation to them. You were raised by dragons and have never known the touch of a woman," Halvdan looked rather proud of himself.

Oh. Oh no. No, no.

*Now* he got it.
"Are they prostitutes?" he asked, nervous but frank. They didn't understand Norse, so they couldn't get offended, right?

"They're courtesans, not common harlots! And they're good girls," Halvdan redefined. "Good friends of the Guard for a while now...oh, don't be like that now!"

Hiccup was shaking his head.

"No," he voiced firmly. "No. Absolutely not."

Halvdan appeared irritated, but not swayed.

"Your sixteen and yet to experience a woman. It's gotta happen sometime!"

Maybe so, but not like this. Not with strangers. Doris would not stop smiling at him. It was very distracting. Hiccup tried not to look at her, but something about the flash of her teeth and the curve of her eyes kept drawing his like a magnet.

And Hagne managed to make him feel naked with that stare. He could hardly look at her.

"C'mon now," Halvdan urged, giving the girls a gentle push towards him. As if they could get any closer.

With a deft move otherwise unheard of under such inebriation, Hiccup managed to slip past Hagne in a marginal opening. No longer trapped between the girls and the table, Hiccup also lost his support, and he teetered for a moment trying to regain balance.

His face continued to burn. Thoughts of what Halvdan (and the girls) expected him to be doing with them plagued his mind against his will. Even after all he had drank, it wouldn't sit well with him.

"No," he insisted, shaking his head. "No prostitutes—courtesans—whatever. That's all kinds of awkward."

And two! He wouldn't know what to do with one!

Maybe that was the problem.

"You gotta trust me on this kid. Go on." Halvdan looked so hopeful, Hiccup almost felt bad.

He couldn't. It was too weird. He didn't know them.

"Sorry," he said to the girls, both of whom looked confused and crestfallen.

_He was the 'Rider'. He was a novelty._

Hiccup ignored Halvdan's calls for him to come back as he buried himself into the writhing mass of musical bodies, intent on escaping the tavern as soon as possible.

He had a lot to sleep off.

"
"-We!

Set out for Svitjod's

Shores!
With honor and
Rewards!
We return back
Home!
We return back
Home!
With honor and
Rewards!
We return back
Home! -'


Hiccup panted. Even when exposed to Miklagard's winter air (and a laughable winter it turned out to be) sweat continued to bead along his forehead and seep through his shirt. His arms shook, having just countered a strong blow from a man who swung his sword around like a club—not a particularly refined art, but quite effective having been on the receiving end more times than Hiccup could count.

He had only himself to blame for the ache in his arms; he lagged in his dodge, he had to block.

There was no getting around it; this opponent was bigger than him. Most Vikings he'd ever face would be and Hiccup had to resign himself now to this disadvantage.

But disadvantage didn't mean failure.

Throughout his training, Hiccup adhered to a number of simple truths entailing to this shortcoming: stay out of his opponent's reach, or get in his personal space and use smaller size as an advantage. Body shots were pointless; he didn't have the strength to put a dent in the man. Go for extremities or soft point, but only if it didn't leave himself vulnerable. One hit from his opponent could take him out.

Good thing Hiccup had a talent for crippling via extremities.

The enemy broadsword flashed forward again with a fearsome strength powering its strike. It was a long arc, forceful, intent to lead Hiccup into struggling under another blow, to weaken him further.

The best thing Hiccup learned from Domokos—even more so than his bow skills—was core strength. It always came back to core strength. He was tight, had complete control over his weight, able to switch directions at a moment's notice.

He danced out of the sword's path faster than its wielder could keep up.

Hiccup's greatest boon fell to his footwork, slipping in and out of arms' reach, managing sudden attacks from the side, feinting and dodging—all only possible because his feet brought him there first.
Parry, don't block, parry, don't block—the mantra flowed through his mind as a great arm swung at him, the blade attached merely an extension of the controlled charge. Hiccup bobbed and weaved, tapping the strikes to the side to throw the man off kilter with the force of his own weight. Usually this would have been effective enough for Hiccup to take the advantage on a direct attack, but this particular contender was too experienced to stumble.

Hiccup's own blade—forged by his very hands and modeled after a Hungarian sabre—did a remarkable job standing up to the thick, heavy metal of a Viking sword. Its weight allowed for it to follow Hiccup's quick, light movements, its slight curve giving a new element to the joining of weapons, helping direct the slide of other metals. This wasn't a weapon to strike directly with; this was a sword meant for flying actions and unseen attacks.

But, above all, the very most important thing Hiccup learned about fighting larger opponents was to never fight fair. He didn't fight to show off, he didn't fight for honor; he fought to survive. And surviving often meant winning.

Hiccup grunted as he leapt back, just barely missing a skimming blade to the stomach. Earlier blows from inabilities to divert started to wear on him, and while his opponent, swinging around far more mass, looked just as tired as he felt, Hiccup knew he needed to end this.

The Viking was in the end of his lunge, quickly catching his weight after missing his intended target and redirecting it for another fine arc of his sword, aimed at Hiccup's neck.

Hiccup ducked under the swing, helping it by with his sabre, and popped back up from the swift dip, this time stepping forward into the brief opening of the larger body. He dragged his sword down the other's length, keeping it at bay as he entered the danger zone. His move was sudden, unpredictable to the pattern he had intentionally set up, but, against such an opponent, a risky move would not go unpunished.

Fighting a right-handed man meant they had mirroring sides of armed and unarmed hands; they both shared same-sided openings. Sure enough, Hiccup felt a crunching pain in a soft area of his back, just above his hipbone, as the older man swung a punch with his free hand. At the same time Hiccup succeeded in driving a sharp, precise fist into the yielding base of the man's neck.

He could feel the throat drive inward at his throw.

The Viking staggered back by a half step, shocked, eyes bulging as the previously abusing hand clutched the damage area. The sword arm lost its strength, relinquishing its unconscious push against Hiccup's sabre.

It wasn't good enough. Hiccup needed him down. Hiccup spun around the gagging man and adroitly kicked the back of his knee. It buckled. The man, still fighting for oxygen stumbled forward, finally dropping to one knee.

"Dirty—" Harald made a noise between a grunt and a cough. "Dirty trick."

Though victories were few and far between for Hiccup, he never seemed to have the energy to celebrate.

"I think you made something explode," Hiccup grimaced, rubbing the very tender area of his back. Thankfully it was far, far lower than his axe-wound.

Harald bared his teeth at the complaint.

"I cannot breathe—!" The little brat was a terror when he really wanted to win.
Harald would be the first to admit his initial admiration of the lad's latent sword skills, and they had only grown from there. Someone had done a spectacular job training him in the basics, because the foundation of his knowledge gave Harald a steady-minded student to build upon.

But Hiccup's methods of making up for his lack of strength and size annoyed him to no end. The lad actually bit Harald once, and the man had been reluctant to put the boy in too many holds since.

Hiccup had yet to go for the groin in a fight, but Harald knew it was only a matter of time.

The Viking stabbed the tip of his sword into the compact dirt and used it as an aid to hoist his weight off the ground. Across from him, Hiccup continued to pout and massage his side, going from a determined fighter to wounded kitten in an instant.

Harald shook his head. The lad fostered an underlying drive to excel. A thirst to succeed. He would have commended Hiccup on maintaining such a Viking-oriented trait if he didn't think he'd be bitten for it. Again.

"Urk," Harald cleared his throat, and took a deep breath, testing its ability to function. Air filled his lungs with a slight rattle; it would do. "You did good. You're getting better. You still gotta learn how to use your legs. They're longer than your arms—if you got the right control and strength over them it would make for some devastating blows..."

"Yeah," Hiccup sighed, abandoning his back, "I keep forgetting."

"Practice until it's instinct," Harald lectured him. "Use the bag."

Hiccup absently nodded in assent. Halvdan had delivered a burlap sack on a post to his room—one apparently meant for training. Hiccup didn't know what was in it, but it could hardly be called soft. After the first day he learned to bandage his knuckles and wrists for support and protection. He punched it daily to improve his strength, each time imagining it was a different Væringjar's face, and that his wrists hadn't broken yet was a good sign.

He wanted—needed—power behind each deceptive punch.

Hiccup's body grew stronger with each day, gradually filling out with all his hard work, erasing the marks left by the Væringjar's actions barring the scar on his back. His stamina had increased exponentially by now—to where he felt normal. He could run circles around Halvdan, much to the man's chagrin, and, while Harald never challenged Hiccup to races, Hiccup knew he could beat him as well.

"You're going to learn how to grapple next," Harald announced and Hiccup winced. He excelled in dancing out of people's reach; grappling sounded like a situation that would force him to learn a new, winning tactic.

It also sounded like he would pay for that throat strike.

"Alright," Hiccup conceded. He fiddled with the sword-tie on his belt.

Harald rubbed his throat one last time, eyeing the young man. The kid had so much potential as a great Viking; he had everything but the size.

The Viking shook his head. More's the pity that potential would never be realized.

Who knows? Maybe, somehow, there was a step up from 'Viking' in this world, and the Rider would be the first to reach it.
Kid was still a brat.

"Practice your kicks," Harald left him with. "I gave you three openings and you never took them."

Hiccup blinked at the abrupt parting, and then proceeded to spend the rest of the day thinking back on the spar, trying to pinpoint where.

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The past month and a half of working in the smith-shop-tent turned out to be everything Hiccup dreamed it would. Not only did he have access to all the materials he once loved to have at his disposal, but he had his skills back up to standard under Demyan's rough and terrifying guidance. Learning the trade from different masters gave Hiccup the precious advantage of learning a whole new set of skills, learning it under Demyan helped develop thicker skin against thinly veiled death threats.

Being in a smith-based environment triggered old urges to resurface in Hiccup. He went back to carrying a notebook around with him everywhere—a new one, with larger, cleaner pages—at first sketching the city rich with art, and then moving onto his own ideas. Statues he would build if he knew how to carve stones, designs he would paint on vases. He recorded the architecture. He sketched the different faces found in the multi-cultural city—documenting the many types of people in the world. He sketched weapons he wouldn't use on dragons.

He subconsciously started to treat a corner of the tent as an office for personal projects, just as he had with Gobber, piling designs and half-finished personal projects in the delegated space. That earned him a quick reminder that Demyan was not Gobber, as the man proceeded to drop anvils too close to his feet any time Hiccup left things lying about.

Demyan had yet to actually lay a hand on Hiccup, but Hiccup could have sworn he'd come close a couple of times.

Doris, the prost—courtesan from the tavern had taken to popping up around Hiccup's workspace, which Hiccup found rather...unsettling. He confronted Halvdan about it (whom he was still mad at), but the man swore he had nothing to do with it. The woman would often watch him work, keeping a distance so not to get in the way, but providing such a distraction for him that proximity had no value. She didn't speak to him, not even in Greek. She would pop in, watch him work, smile at him, and leave. She would giggle too—usually after he dropped something he shouldn't have dropped because he knew she was watching him. Her visits were infrequent, and brief, and seemed to have nothing to do with her profession at all.

Still, Hiccup knew better than to think she saw him as anything other than the Rider.

The other event Demyan's absence caused was an opportunity for Hiccup to get out his stowed-away mess of a half-constructed tailfin.

The original was destroyed. By the fall mostly—but Harald admitted to destroying the rest of it. He promised it was before the axe incident, but Hiccup hardly cared. It was time for an upgrade anyway.

Oh, but how he wished for the blueprints. He built it before and he could build it again, it was all in
his head and he had the matching, live fin at his beck-and-call, but it would have gone so much faster if he had the written design on him.

Hiccup also lacked the freedom he once had. Demyan almost popped an eye right out of his socket when he saw the mess Hiccup made after crafting the structure poles, and Hiccup learned to be more discreet with the task.

What once took a single night ended up taking Hiccup well over a week thanks to time constraints and a need to perfect the new design. Within the same week he went to the tanner, thinking he could refurbish the saddle (which looked a little worse for wear) when the tanner offered to make one for him. The man's generosity may have been attributed to having to touch Toothless in order to take measurements. Hiccup didn't care about underhanded reasoning, he'd be saving time and getting a better quality product than if he undertook the assignment himself.

Sometimes, having a cat deity for a dragon comes in handy.

Speaking of said deity, Toothless had taken to hounding Hiccup off and on about his progress on the tailfin. Hiccup could not begrudge him for this. They both ached for the winds and the freedom again; their grounded lifestyle carried with it the ill tinge of bad memories and a sense of captivity, even when treated well.

Hiccup also found himself worried about Toothless' health. The dragon flapped his wings often, tried to keep them limber, glided short distances—but nothing would compare to being so high the air burned. The Night Fury's exercise was limited, and it had to have a negative effect on his mind and body.

Hiccup wondered if dragons got sick from being grounded. If, perhaps, it caused a mental trauma that weakened their body in every fashion?

It would certainly explain the unlikelihood of a grounded dragon's survival.

Hiccup hammered away at his second-to-last bolt. The red-hot nugget sent up ember flakes as he slowly formed its head into a hexagon. He was on the home stretch; he'd have this tail fin done in moments. He would be able to test the smoother design for the fin-control. He was going to get out of this city, it was high time he had. He was getting better—better than before—fitter. There were less and less things keeping him here.

While it may be that, in the end, he benefited from coming there, it did little to counter the memories of what he went through. He saw the great city. He was over it.

Something shuffled on the other side of the tent; Hiccup sensed movement.

It couldn't be Doris. He never seemed to hear her coming until it was too late.

"I'll clean it up," Hiccup pitched to who he assumed was Demyan. Hopefully he wouldn't get a hammer thrown at his head. Again. "Just let me finish this bolt—"

Lifting his head revealed a far different character than Demyan. Someone who had, more or less, avoided coming near Hiccup at all.

Bolli.

The man who had been set on humiliating him during his first introduction to Miklagard.

Hiccup's nostrils flared, intense irritation springing on him along with the urge to start swearing. He
pushed both feelings down.

"What?" he!prompted shortly, his voice sharp. He continued his work, but with many, many glances upward to keep tabs on the man. It made progress slow.

Bolli moved forward, leisurely, stopping at a good distance from the boy. Perhaps he understood the likelihood of being stabbed with a hot poker.

"I heard from some of the other men that your mother grew up here."

Hiccup stilled only for a moment before resuming his hammering.

"So?" He risked a glance to the open street, able to see Toothless sprawled across the corner of a flat roof. His tail dangled, flicking back and forth, his eyes narrowed on the visiting Viking.

"Valka?" Bolli asked, sounding unsure.

Hiccup turned his eyes back up to the man.

"Yeah..."

"Your mother was little Val?"

Hiccup's heart clenched, suspense seizing his breath, and for that moment he didn't care about the history between him and Bolli—he cared only for the potential history between Bolli and his mother.

"You knew her?" he didn't normally let his emotions slip like this around the Vikings—not innocent emotions such as hope and wonderment, and certainly not in front of dubious characters such as this man—but he couldn't help it. His mother still existed in the very corners of the world she traveled. She left this world marked and branded with her presence.

"Aye," Bolli admitted with a deliberate nod. "She was just a wee lass herself when she first came here, and I new to the Væringjar, but it'll be hard to forget a girl like that. Made sure everyone knew who she was, she did."

Hiccup listened, his project abandoned and he didn't care how eager or childish he behaved. This was why he came here. The first hint that turned his sights on the city.

For the first time Hiccup really looked at Bolli. He noticed the streaks of grey pulling at his temples, at the lines of his forehead that didn't fade even after he relaxed his face. He could have been in Miklagard for ages. He honestly could have known his mother.

Hiccup licked his lips, wanting to ask so many things—what was she like as a child? Was she scrawny too? Did she freckle or question incessantly or draw?

He wanted to. But that element of pride he unintentionally nurtured over weeks past seemed to keep him from falling into total shambles. He doubted Bolli would answer anyway; the man was one of the handful of Vikings who would not accept his and Toothless' presence, too ingrained in his roots to ever attempt to get to know the pair of travelers—not that they were willing on their end, either. It would be entirely likely that Bolli came here simply to tease Hiccup with such information and leave.

Bolli stared hard at Hiccup, seemingly able to see right through him.

"So...you're her kid?"

Hiccup, suddenly self-conscious, cleared his throat. He felt judged.
"Yeah," he replied, holding his head up a bit more. He wasn’t ashamed of being her child. Quite the contrary; at times he still felt the reverse might be true, had she lived.

"Huh." And it was all Bolli said on the matter. "So she found herself a husband. Never thought she would, considering how averse she was to the idea of being tied down. But of an odd one, that girl."

Just like him! Hiccup hoped Bolli would go on—accidentally slip some more character into the woman sketched roughly through words—but the Viking seemed to catch himself when Hiccup leaned forward, and better guarded his musings.

"No, she married," Hiccup said softly, a bit disappointed when Bolli stopped there. 'To a chief,' he wanted to add, but felt the less information he gave out about himself the better. Simply as a precaution. He didn't want these people to somehow be able to track him after he left.

The Viking gave another slow nod, still looking at Hiccup with eyes that evaluated him.

"So she did. And she let her son run half-way across the world on a dragon, did she?"

The way Bolli worded it, that unsavory stare...it sounded critical, as if accusing Hiccup of being a runaway. Which he was, but not in the traditional sense.

Hiccup understood then, of the man's presence and of his indirect speech. Bolli didn't come here to meet Valka's son; he came here to condemn Valka's memory for having a son like him.

"She's dead," Hiccup returned with far more aggression than he planned. Suddenly, he didn't care if Bolli happened to be the last living connection to his mother outside of Berk. He wanted him out. He wanted him gone.

He returned to hammering away at the nail, forging it with all the growing anger he felt.

"Ah," Bolli murmured, not sounding too shocked at the notion. He kept his features guarded better than the Sisters and Hiccup found himself annoyed with the man's continued noncommittal responses. "How'd she go? Battle?"

The hammering stopped, but Hiccup remained silent for a while longer, taking the opportunity to dip the clamped, reshaped bolt into a tub of lukewarm water. Then he moved a heavy gaze onto Bolli's steel-blue eyes, the rising steam acting as a veil to soften the reply.

"She was taken."

"By...?"

Hiccup cursed his eyes for flickering to Toothless' perch, visible to anyone who cared to look. He gave the answer away to his antagonist, but rather than wallowing in regret, his mind took the trigger as an opportunity to relive every unguarded, drunken word he'd head about his mother.

As a child he pieced together the story—a story his father was unwilling to speak to him about—and he concocted his own memory of it. He was only a babe, but the thought still haunted him.

She had been taken by a dragon—the breed unknown to Hiccup, but he imagined it as a Gronkle or a Nightmare. She was taken defending him.

Hiccup heard several accounts by murmured Vikings who hadn't seen him crawling around underfoot.
A dragon tore off their roof and went for him—his mother reaching him just in time. Another account claimed he was outside for some reason and that's where the dragon tried to attack his infant self. Wherever Hiccup was, his mother was there to save him and was snatched by the dragon and carried off with the rest of their livestock. One woman claimed she saw the dragon, and that its talons had already pierced through her stomach. That she was carted off, limp and bleeding.

That's how he remembered her; to this day, that's what he saw when he thought of his mother. Not the hugs or kisses she may have showered on her husband. Not the way she might have cradled him as he slept.

He thought of her as defeated. Limp. Punctured. Food.

So he tried not to think of her at all.

Now he knew more... that his mother was dropped into the Demon's awaiting mouth, as Toothless described.

"She was taken," he repeated, softer. His eyes glowed in the firelight flaring from the pit at his side, driving against Bolli's own intense stare. A charged moment passed between the men; an underhanded, subtle battle occurred where each indirectly accused the other of being connectedly responsible to her death.

'She was taken and skewered like you skewered me.'

'Fine job of honoring her memory.'

Hiccup didn't know how long this battle of wills persevered. It could have been eternity; it could have been within a single breath—just like his mother's last. Neither man would take condemnation from the other.

At long last, Bolli responded.

"I guess you don't take after her too much, then?" he said lightly, as though he refused to acknowledge any sort of correlation to "little Val"'s death, and how he tried to kill her son.

Hiccup bristled. It wasn't an insult at him, it was said as an insult to his mother.

She wasn't as strong as him. She couldn't survive what he could.

More than the man in front of him, Hiccup hated the thoughts that followed this perception, because a horrible, malicious part of his mind recognized this.

He survived the fall that brought him into the custody of the Vikings, and the axe to the back, and the capture itself. Thinking back on it, wasn't his link with Toothless that could take credit. Even before, when he first learned to fix Toothless' flight, he took spills that left him limping for days, at velocities that, by all rights, should have broken his neck. He always got back up; a little worse for wear, but never broken beyond repair. Though smaller and frailer than the Viking's that surrounded him, his body was far more resilient than it appeared. He couldn't give a punch to save his life back then, but he could take them. He did take them. He was never down for long.

And then the flight... his chosen element. His safe haven. His love for dragons... everything that stole his mother from him.

It must have killed his father—to know his weak son chose to be taken by a dragon; surviving something his brilliant, beautiful, capable wife couldn't.
Hiccup's eyes lost their focus as he began the process of hammering the finished and cooled bolts into the fan joints.

He was a disappointment to his father. Hiccup knew this, he accepted this...or tried to. But, for the first time since learning how to hold his own, to live on his own, Hiccup wondered if he disappointed his mother. If she watched him from wherever she was, wounded at his decision to command and revel in the very situation that brought her to her death.

Perhaps he was overcomplicating the matter, but the irony was no longer lost on him. He travelled across the world with the subconscious goal to find a piece of his mother, only to realize he could have been spitting on her grave all the while.

He felt a bit sick.

"Leave," Hiccup commanded, hardly making it above a whisper.

Volume wasn't necessary in such a situation; Bolli did as he asked, abandoning Hiccup to the bitter taste in his mouth that wouldn't allow a shred of joy in seeing the tailfin almost at a finish.

::I didn't know that about your brood-mother:::

Hiccup jerked. Several bolts clattered to the floor.

"Augh—sh—," he swore, bending down to pick up the nails. It served as a fine distraction to his bout of self-loathing. "Yeah. Yeah, it was a while ago."

Toothless snuck his head into the tent, cocking it as he watched the boy busy himself. Hiccup wouldn't make eye contact with him.

::You are still sad about it::: he observed.

Hiccup stood, shrugging one shoulder, still focusing re-organizing his materials.

"I think I'll always be sad about it." He cranked the last bolt into place, more than ready for a change in subject. "Come here, I want to see how this fits."

The dragon allowed the transition, not wanting to pursue a subject that would only serve to sadden his human. He swung the backend of his body into the forge and presented his tail.

::Didn't you take enough measurements to have it absolutely perfect?:::

Hiccup bent down, aligning the two fins.

"Have to account for human error," he explained, tinkering with the buckles.

::Ah, yes. The error of humans:::

Hiccup quirked his lips, the amusement feeling lightly less hollow.

"So many errors."

::So many:::

The boy finished strapping the new tailfin onto its host, pulling it open to its fullest extent. He still had a ways to go before all the flying gear was collected and assembled, but it was a start.
"There!" he declared, tugging on the prosthetic one last time. "How does that feel? Equal?"

Toothless lifted his tail slightly off the ground, fanning his good wing.

::Um::

"Yeah?"

Hiccup looked so expectant that Toothless felt pained to reply honestly.

::No. Sorry, it's much lighter. Too light, actually. It'll throw me off...::

Strangely enough, Hiccup only brightened at his critique.

"Good," Hiccup beamed, and he began to remove the fin again. "Because I have a brilliant and cunning plan."

Toothless was always glad to see Hiccup smile after the boy experienced emotional turmoil, but his smile quickly turned into that smile. The one that, mixed with Hiccup's definition of 'brilliant' and 'cunning', often led to more grey scales.

::What?:: he asked in apprehension.

The dragon's tone reminded Hiccup that he would, in fact, need Toothless' consent to execute this plan.

"Oh..." his voice died a bit. "I guess I should get your permission first..."

::What?: Toothless repeated. The fact that Hiccup looked worried about getting his permission worried him.

"When will you start shedding scales?" Hiccup asked instead. The dragon shed scales at seemingly random intervals to Hiccup, but apparently they made perfect sense to dragons. Sometimes the scales would fall off on their own, but usually Toothless would just rub and rub against hard surfaces—trees, rocks—until clusters of them fell.

Hiccup was beating around the bush, working up to the central point. Toothless answered him anyway.

::Usually not for many moon cycles...but if it's too warm then much, much sooner. I'm growing faster. It could be as soon as one moon cycle...maybe two... Why::

All thoughts of The Plan fled Hiccup's mind and he backtracked through Toothless' explanation.

"Wait...you're growing faster?"

The Night Fury did look a little bigger, and not just around the middle. The chest was broader, the tail longer, all things Hiccup wouldn't have noticed if it hadn't been pointed out to him. He spent every waking moment with the dragon when he could. He noticed Toothless' growth as much as he noticed his own.

Something wasn't right. Dragons aged too slowly for a human to see any difference...

Hiccup's stomach plummeted.

"Oh gods...it's the bond...I-I didn't even agree to anything...!"
Not officially. Subconsciously he might have...

::I made my choice. I want this:: Toothless quickly assured him. It did little to quell the look of guilt on Hiccup's face.

"You're scared," the human pointed out. He was scared, so Toothless had to be. Toothless was aging; Toothless was losing his life.

::No:: Toothless insisted. ::It's different. And different is...:: he wouldn't use scared ::...unusual::

Hiccup wouldn't have any of it.

"Unusual is just another term for different. You're scared."

::Whatever!:: Toothless snapped. He'd never regret his choice; he'd never let Hiccup leave him first.

::Why do you need to know about my scales::?

Hiccup swallowed the need to push Toothless into explaining his feelings—he didn't want Toothless to feel scared and alone, but the dragon could be so obstinate about sharing his insecurities.

"I want to make a coating of them on the tail fin," he blurted out. "...to match you."

Of all the things Toothless expected, it wasn't that.

The lack of immediate reaction had Hiccup feeling a tad anxious.

"It will be completely experimental. Maybe I could lay them like shingles...or maybe I could find away to melt them...I don't know, it was just an idea. It's stupid. I can fix it to make it heavier—"

::No, no:: Toothless stopped him. ::It's a good idea. Do it::

Hiccup's eyebrows rose, hopeful.

"Really?"

::Yes::

"Wow...okay! Really? Yeah, you already said yes. Yes! Okay, right, this will be fun. Then it'll be fireproof too! Oh! I hadn't even thought about those types of benefits..."

::Does this mean we'll have to wait before we can go flying::?

This stopped Hiccup's inane mumblings. The boy's shoulder's seized and he looked apologetic at the dragon.

"Ah, yeah...I'm sorry buddy."

::It's fine:: Toothless brushed off. Hiccup moved forward and placed a hand on Toothless' skull before the dragon could skulk off.

"Thanks for being so patient with me."

::You better not be referring to your recovery::—:: Toothless began, voice teetering on the edge of dangerous.

"I meant my crazy hobbies...I miss flying too, bud, but I really want to get this right, make it better
than before."

::Like how you want to make yourself better than before?::

"Yeah," Hiccup said softly, for the first time seeing the connection.

::You have ridiculous standards::

"I know," Hiccup grinned. "But look at who I have to measure up to."

He gestured to the dragon, playing up to the Night Fury's vanity. Toothless cocked an eyebrow, sitting up a little straighter.

::Your standards are acceptable::

It was Apokreas, in Miklagard. Hiccup didn't know all the details behind this two-week long event, other than it had something to do with Christianity and it involved the longest party he'd ever heard of. It also happened to be three days after his seventeenth birthday, so Hiccup pretended all the festivities taking place up and down the streets were for him.

Because hanging out with Toothless made him feel like it was okay to have silly, selfish thoughts. As long as they stayed inside his head.

Unsurprisingly, Halvdan was at his side, Toothless at his other. Halvdan had already forced a drink down Hiccup's throat. Hiccup let him; the incessant rain that served as a substitute for snow in this world cleared just in time for the carnival, the sun was warm on his cheeks—in the few times it broke out of the overcast—and the singing and dancing clogging every street were enough to help him tolerate even Halvdan's pushy nature.

Toothless thumped his tail on the ground, watching the humans spin 'round and 'round in intricate patterns, his eyes occasionally drawn to flashing lights reflected from all the jewelry-decorated partiers. He found these human celebrations as the most entertaining occurrence since he first saw himself in the Mirror. Who knew that such problematic blights on nature could create such beautiful motions?

::They're even better than you!:: he said, excitedly to his human. His tail continued to thump in time to the music, uncontrolled.

"What!" Hiccup scoffed in mock affront. "You've never seen me dance."

And it was probably for the best. Hiccup only ever danced at tribal gatherings, and only when forced, where he spent more time tripping over his own feet than actual dancing.

::Yes I did:: Toothless insisted. ::That time when we first met, I made you do this::

He gestured with his head at the line dancing. Hiccup rolled his eyes.

"I wasn't dancing," he stressed, "I was...avoiding the lines...with flair."

::Flair is dancing::
"Whatever."

::Woman::

Hiccup stared at the dragon, incredulous.

"Excuse me?"

Toothless nudged his nose toward the crowd.

::It's that woman::

Hiccup followed the nose and almost choked on his spit when he saw Doris approaching their group. She smiled at him, her dark eyes playful as she weaved her way through the last, few bodies separating them.

"Um..." Hiccup began, feeling the oncoming of a strange panic, not knowing what to say when she stopped in front of him.

But then she turned to face Halvdan, and spoke to him in Greek. Hiccup's relief was short lived.

Halvdan's face lightened. He glanced at Hiccup, chuckled, and replied to her: "Dance."

Doris beamed and repositioned herself direction in front of Hiccup. She leveled a finger at his face and said, very clearly, "Dance!"

Hiccup could feel his face frozen in shock, positive he had misunderstood such a simple and obvious request. Why would a prostitute want to dance with him?

Not that it mattered to him what she did for a living—he didn't feel like embarrassing himself.

Hiccup quickly found his voice, "No."

"Yes!" she was just as quick to counter.

The young man spent a fleeting moment in stupefaction that she responded in Norse, before realizing that, as a "friend" of the Væringjar, she must have picked up a few simple words.

"Do it," Halvdan pushed, enjoying the entire scene unfolding before him. They had even started to get a few stares from surrounding celebrators, probably drawn to the sight of a woman approaching the two travelers.

::Do it!:: Toothless urged, and Hiccup whipped his head around, betrayal written all over his face.

Before he could yell at Toothless for turning on him like this, he felt a small hand grab his wrist

"Dance," Doris said, again, tugging him into the mass of dancers.

"I don't know what I'm doing!" he complained. He attempted to pull his arm back with no real force.

::That's even better!:: Toothless crowed amidst Halvdan's obnoxious laughter.

"You guys are complete asses—!"

"Dance!" Doris chirped again, wanting him to move faster.

"Remember: think "human"," Harald supplied.
Hiccup started what was sure to be a very rude gesture but Doris had captured his other arm as well, leading him backwards into the union of dancers.

"Dance. Good," she said when she stopped them at the very perimeter of the circle of dancers.

His unease must have been palpable because her smile softened. Not bothering with any more words, Doris took his right arm and guided it to her waist. Hiccup couldn't stop the dry swallow that betrayed his nervousness as he tried to determine how tightly he should even be touching her.

Her hip felt...squishier than he thought it would. She wasn't firm with the muscle most Viking girls had in their youth, and she wasn't padded with meat-and-gruel insulation as older women were. She was just...soft. She lightly pressed her front to his and he could tell her body, everywhere, was soft. No muscle definition, not even in her arms, having never trained before in her life.

But she was exceedingly feminine, from the pronounced curves shaping her clothes, to the delicate arches of her face. He had never met anyone more traditionally...woman.

Doris took his other hand and held it out from their bodies. She held his gaze for a moment, and smiled as if to say 'ready?'. Then she guided them into the fray.

Hiccup's stomach flipped, not feeling quite ready at all for the action. He didn't even know why dancing made him so nervous. Maybe he felt like there were too many expectations on him to perform in a certain manner. He had always felt that way; like he was thrown into situations because people wanted to see him fail at them.

But, surprisingly enough, hardly anyone looked at them. Everyone was too busy dancing themselves, or clapping, or singing, or laughing or drinking. No one stood out in this crowd except for Toothless, and as soon as Hiccup was dragged from his side he regained a little more anonymity.

Hiccup's feet were sluggish for a while. He focused on everyone around them, trying desperately to pick up the pattern of the dance (trying desperately not to look at Doris), and it didn't take long before he managed to. His eye for design came through for him.

Then he focused on performance.

Hiccup quickly found that if he pretended this was a training exercise, the movements came easier. Core strength and balance kept him from stumbling, rhythm and memory kept him on beat. He could do this.

A tentative smile came to his face as their pair began to blend in with the rest.

"Good," Doris said, just soft enough that the word could only be heard between them.

Hiccup smiled wider, releasing a short laugh, drawing one from Doris as well. He twirled her in time with every other fellow's partner and brought her back to his arms.

He did have fun. This was fun. Hiccup hadn't felt this playful in a long, long while. Certainly, not since he came to Miklagard.

He was no longer mad at Toothless for pushing him into this.

They danced for two more dances, the music and partying never slowing, even as more and more clouds formed overhead. Eventually, their feet moved them to the very border of the dancing mass. A break in the onlookers revealed a narrow path into an alley between buildings, and Hiccup, too focused on dancing, didn't realize anything amiss until he found himself spun away from the circle of
dancers.

For a moment, dizziness took hold. He registered that it was suddenly darker, people no longer surrounded him, and the music and laughter of the celebration managed to become separated.

Doris pushed Hiccup up against a wall. Hiccup felt small hands on his shoulders driving forth a pressure he didn't think could come from such a body, and then he felt the hard surface of whatever structure was behind him against his back.

Thank the gods he had healed enough for this kind of abuse.

He was granted a brief reprieve of his confusion as his eyes came to focus on Doris's face, intense, focused and determined, shadowed by the seclusion of their location.

Then Doris stood on her tiptoes and pushed her mouth against his.

Hiccup's mind immediately went into protest. He had told her 'no!' Granted that was weeks ago, but his decision hadn't changed. He didn't know her, so he wasn't comfortable with...this...

So why did the hands fallen to her waist not push her away?

His logic fled quickly as his actions rebelled against his intent. He tried to grasp onto reason, tried to prevent his body from responding to her—but she had her fingers tangled in his hair, with nails scraping at the base of the strands to create an indescribable sensation that swooped from his scalp to the pit of his stomach.

Why was she doing this? He didn't understand this.

He sort of understood this.

This was nothing like with Gudrid. Gudrid's affection for him was pure, innocent, and developed. He almost felt as much guilt and sorrow as he did passion when he kissed Gudrid.

Doris...Doris was only passion. There were, near literally, no words to be spoken between them—only action. It was so raw with this woman. Rough. She knew he rode a dragon and worked in a smith shop and wasn't interested in paid sex. She saw him as a conquest.

These weren't good reasons to kiss him. He knew these things about Doris. So why was he only pushing back at her with his own mouth? Why did the thought of someone using him not turn him off?

Perhaps, because she came with no expectation from him.

Hiccup's neck bent willingly with Doris's forceful tug on his hair. His eyes fluttered close, and in that defeat his awareness magnified. Her lips were every bit as soft as the rest of her, but far more toned. She captured and released his with just the right about of tantalization that left him yearning for more.

She'd linger over his mouth every now and then, her lips hovering with a gentle brush to give him an obvious opening to take action. And he took it. Tentative—Halvdan was right about one thing; he wasn't experienced with women—but careful in returning actions he read from her. Top lip—hold, bottom lip—draw.

His mind felt sluggish but his body was in overdrive. His pounding heart almost served as a distraction in its din and there were certain parts of his mouth that—when she paid special attention to them—his stomach swooped and heat settled between his hips. This never happened before.
It scared him, this sort of sensation. He couldn't deny that kissing her excited him, but he wanted to go slow. It was almost too fast for him; he didn't like this nervousness that aroused the very core of his being, because he couldn't pinpoint if it were good or bad.

Of course, she picked up on this—the woman was a prostitute. She probably understood human cues the way Hiccup understood Toothless.

_Oh gods_—was Toothless watching this?

That would have been the one, winning thought to break through this enchantment of lust, if Doris had not done something Hiccup hadn't know one could _do_ while kissing. Her tongue entered his mouth. He gasped, froze, and allowed the muscle to gently poke past his teeth.

This...this was...weird.

His lax jaw slowly, _slowly_ parted to let her do what she wanted because his fear and curiosity had grown too strong to fight it.

Rain began to drizzle on their heads and Hiccup could hear the muted cheers of the celebrators—none willing to be driven inside by the skies. The dancing continued. Doris continued.

Her body was pressed flush against his and for the first time he realized just _how_ soft she was. He'd never had a woman against him like this—not willingly. He'd never had a woman rub a leg against the outside of his, or curl her arms around his neck to further lock him into a kiss he thought couldn't possibly get deeper.

Feeling her tongue against his—smooth and stroking and tasting—was terrifying, enthralling, almost too much. He was shaking; she must have felt it—through the clothes that he gripped, through his chest that she hugged.

He had to do something. He had to stop it. He had to continue it.

His tongue tentatively passed over her bottom lip. He felt her teeth, the soft underside of her own tongue. It was...wet. He'd never had his tongue in another human's mouth before. He'd never had another human's tongue in _his_ mouth before. He'd never _heard_ of this.

The rain empowered her scent—spice and powder. The wall behind him, the dancers, the clapping—
they all disappeared. He was falling. Was he breathing? His head was spinning. He could only sense her in this everlasting moment.

It wasn't until she gently pulled away from him, drawing their kiss to a close, that Hiccup realized how tightly he held her against him. Willingly.

Of all the things to notice first, it was that he did hold his breath; he had to have, to be breathing so heavily now. He wanted to say something, but the rain—though a mere drizzle—mixed with the afterglow of their kiss, made for a deafening atmosphere. He was sure he wouldn't have heard his own voice.

So he stared at her, waiting for her to make the first move, seeing as she was so good at it.

Doris' own chest rose and fell with each breath, more pronounced than usual after her "attack" on him, which mean she was breathless too. The rain had plastered the loose wisps of her hair to her temple, her lips were red and wet, her tongue darted out to taste them and Hiccup suddenly saw her as beautiful.

Wordlessly, she reached for his hand—the one still on her hip, slack. Hiccup watched as she lifted it to her eyelevel and began to trace her fingers over the scars of his knuckles. She ran soft, soft hands—too soft to have ever held a weapon—over the newest ones, paying particular attention to one he got in the forge. She was there; he hit a heated sword too close to his hand when he noticed her presence and it burned him. She saw him receive this scar. She remembered.

"What—?" he finally croaked. He was back to not understanding.

Doris brought the hand to her shining lips and kissed the scar, sending a jolt through Hiccup's body that struck his heart more than his loins.

"Good," she murmured.

And then, with one, last, coy look, she left him.

Hiccup stood in that ally, in the rain, with bruised, moist lips, winded and more problems than he knew what to do with.

Chapter End Notes

**The alcohol is Rakia, also known as Rakija or Raki. I don't know what it tastes like, but I'm a whiskey drinker myself, and it sounded a bit like that.

Kissing was very common among the Greeks and Romans—far more than the rest of the world where, back then, some places didn't even kiss their lovers. Yick.

Reminder that I want to keep this rated… pg-13/T. So aside from the occasional swear (because Hiccup is a boy who keeps the company of very bad influences), I won't be writing naughty scenes with naughty words. Just implications.

Hiccup's time in Miklagard is meant to hold a loose symbolism (symbology to Bostonians) pertaining to the phoenix. A reborn-from-the-ashes type of metaphor, if you
will. They were destroyed; they came out better for it.

Thanks for reading through these progressively long chapters T_T
Grounded

Chapter Summary

Hiccup and Toothless share some deep talks, and with Toothless's encouragement Hiccup makes a decision.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Grounded

Those eyes stared down at him. Even impaired by the sable claws raking across every surface of the room, the moonlight streaming through the window highlighted the lead whites. They cut through the darkness with remarkable success and Hiccup could only meet them head-on in a one-sided staring contest. He knew those eyes never ceased watching him—watching the sweat cool the hollow of his neck, watching his breath mellow in soft pants after he jerked from a most...detailed dream.

To think he used to love the painted ceiling. Now it creeped him out.

Hiccup tried not to move as he stretched his senses as far as they would go in the middle of the night, attempting to locate Toothless. No breathing could be heard. No heat of a near body could be felt. Hiccup risked scanning the room.

No dragon.

He wasn't surprised by now. Toothless had taken to leaving in the middle of the night more and more often, staying only long enough Hiccup to fall asleep. The young man couldn't blame him.

Groaning, Hiccup wiped a hand over his face, noting the clamminess of his skin that could not subside the warmth in his cheeks. He used to have this problem back on Berk, where he woke in various hues of morning light, sheets a mess and head muddled with the remnants of dreams. Dreams that usually centered on Astrid, the only female that grabbed his attention in that day. He didn't mind these dreams back then—he had a loft and privacy and believed it to be the closest he would ever get to the girl.

Astrid's involvement in his bitter parting with Berk helped suppress these dreams. Survival and exploration helped him push these moments to the very recess of his mind.

Then Doris kissed him like she had, sparking a reaction he was wholly unprepared for. He didn't have the distractions of flying or finding food or avoiding humans and dragons and monsters. He had a bed, a disobedient body, and an overactive imagination.

Now Doris plagued his dreams as well as Astrid. That girl-twin, Ruffnut, made an appearance a couple times. Doris' friend, whose name he had forgotten but who's eyes he'd never forget, tagged along in one, using the shawl she wore on her head to do things, Hiccup was sure, shawls weren't meant to be used for. That woman who smiled at him from across the smithy popped in just the other day...
Hiccup released a soft growl and he turned to smother his face in the pillow.

What was wrong with him? Why was this happening now? Why was it persisting? He didn't know if this was normal. He never had any guy, human friends aside from Fishlegs, but that friendship faded before they reached the age for this sort of thing. His father never talked to him about it. Gobber tried a couple times, but those moments were more awkward than Hiccup could handle.

He had only seen Doris a couple times since that festival, and always at a distance. He'd usually avert his eyes and shuffle away before he allowed himself a chance to try and discern any emotions from her face. He didn't want to know if he had been so horrible at the tongue-kissing that she now found him repulsive. He didn't want to know if she planned on kissing him again.

He hadn't a clue on how to act. What's worse, he hadn't a clue on what he wanted. He'd never been so at-odds with his own body before.

Except for the whole 'scrawny when he didn't want to be scrawny' issue.

This was stupid. The only reason this happened to him now was because he suppressed it for so long, because he chose to live with a dragon over humans, because he chose isolation from his own race. He was being punished for his choices in some roundabout, sick manner.

With the greatest effort, Hiccup pushed himself to a seated position, groaning all the while at the pressure of exhaustion pulling behind his eyes.

He had to wash up, he had to smack some sense into himself, and he had to try and get some actual sleep. There were far more important things than desire.

Such as necessity.

###

"You making mess!"

"I am not!"

"Da!"

"Not."

"What you call zis?"

"Metal scraps...that I'm cleaning right now!"

"I cut out your eyes viz 'maytal-scraps'."

"Yeah, yeah..."

The dialogue floating from the smith's tent assaulted the ears of nearby stands and pedestrians on nearly a daily basis—one side stuck at a stilted bellow, the other dry and unimpressed. Passerbys always jumped and stared. Regulars went about their business, able to turn the interchange into background noise with practiced ease.

Common though it may be, Toothless never tired of it. The dragon crouched low to the ground,
hiding amidst the plethora of rugs hung in the neighboring stand, listening with perked ears to the bantering of each blacksmith. He peaked his head up over a table acting as a wall between tents.

Demyan stood a good distance from Hiccup, so the boy was in no imminent danger. The Rus seemed to believe he had to raise his already raucous voice to make up for the space between them.

"You do orders!" The blond giant howled, pointing at a line of damaged weapons stacked along a bench.

"I'm doing them right now!" Hiccup lifted one end of the shield he had been re-bracing.

"You do too much 'right now'," Demyan called him out. "You *clayan* now, you *fix* now—you lie!"

"Ugh!" Hiccup threw the shield down on his worktable. "What do you want from me?"

"I vant you burning in own dragon's fire."

Hiccup gave an exaggerated roll of his eyes so that Demyan could understand his sentiments in the simplest terms.

"And to think you're not married," Toothless heard his boy mutter.

"I deliver zis," the blacksmith shook a chained, spiked ball that Toothless couldn't *imagine* being on the end of. "Vhen I come back, zis clayan!"

Demyan swept a massive hand in the general direction of Hiccup and all his projects before skulking out of the tent without bothering to wait for Hiccup to agree.

Hiccup sneered at his back.

"You left a mess everywhere else..."

::*But you left a *foreign* mess::*

Hiccup didn't react when Toothless threw in his supplement. The dragon had to wonder if he were getting predictable or if Hiccup could sense him more easily.

::*I brought you something::*

Hiccup looked up from shuffling around materials in time to see Toothless drop a few scales into the ground from his mouth. Immediately, Hiccup's repair order was abandoned to drag the mostly-finished tailfin from a tent corner and onto a working bench.

"You got them? Already?" Hiccup asked, rather pointlessly as he currently *looked* at them. The materials needed to weight the prosthetic were collected and stowed away days ago on the chance that Hiccup's "project" didn't work out. It would be a quick fix, and they'd be up in the air in *no* time.

But he really, really hoped it *would* work.

It would be so cool.

::*Yep. I was right—it's starting early::* Predictably, Hiccup's smile faltered and Toothless rushed to continue before his human could fall into a bout of shame. ::*It was just a few, for now. More will be coming soon. And thank Ea, because they were feeling tight::*

Hiccup gently picked up the scales that Toothless bestowed upon him. They were cool and hard—harder than stone, if that were possible—and somehow managed to emanate a tenor of death. They
were no longer a part of Toothless; they didn't feed off his life force as the ones coating his body did now. They were more like rocks than scales now.

Hiccup met Toothless' eyes. He still had trouble swallowing the thought of Toothless aging so quickly. Eventually, he would accept it. In a way, he already had. But he would never like it.

"Are you sure you aren't just feeling confined from being grounded for so long?" he carefully asked.

He really worried for Toothless sometimes, more and more often as their stay lengthened. The dragon went through periods of ill humor that were once uncommon for the boastful creature. Through Hiccup's daily job and training, and now the uncomfortable nights, their time together had been cut into as well.

Toothless flicked his ear, dismissing the thought.

::Whatever the reason, it doesn't matter. We'll be in the air again, where we belong, and out of here::

The left corner of Hiccup's mouth pulled upward as he nodded, but something empty filmed over his face.

"I am sorry for this," he spoke, lowly. "I know it's not strictly necessary. We could have been in the air by now—"

::It's fine,:: Toothless cut him off. ::Focus on getting this thing finished::

Hiccup placed the scales on the stoked fire within hearth, resting them on the blistering rocks

"Scale-melt, test one—oh! I should record this—!"

::No!:: Toothless cried ::No writing! Forge—make—whatever your terms are! Just do it! Don't write!::

Hiccup laughed, this time more candid. "Okay, okay!"

It took all of Toothless' draconic pride not to wiggle his backend like an excited hatchling as the boy positioned himself in front of the shanked fan.

"Here we go!"

Hiccup threw his weight down on the bellows, over and over again, breathing life and heat into the forge. The coals glowed with each inspiration, embers rose and rocks crackled. On and on this went...for far longer than Hiccup had ever had to heat anything.

Usually the red glow of a workpiece would alert the young smith to a malleable-ready piece, but the scales remained sleek and black, seemingly unaffected by the increasing warmth.

Sweat beaded over the top of Hiccup's brow as the heat and exertion began to take its toll.

"Damn..." he puffed, feeling the muscles in his back clinch with another push on the bellow. "You guys really are fireproof..."

The natural climate of the city did nothing to help the blooming sauna. Wet and muggy—Berk's warmest spring couldn't compare to the humidity of Miklagard's late winter. Hiccup ached to take his shirt off—the cloth clung to his skin in confinement as sweat dampened his chest and pits—but doing so in a forge was about as foolishly unsafe as one could get. He had enough scars on his torso as is.
He didn't know how long he was at it, only that he worked those bellows for longer than he ever had to in his life in the worst possible atmosphere. Eventually, Hiccup had to let up for fear of passing out. Panting, he stepped back from the hearth, giving his arms and back a short respite from the workout. He wouldn't have to train with Harald today if this kept up.

The handful of scales sat in the fire, content as could be, glittering a glossy black that mocked Hiccup for an effort wasted. Hiccup swore lightly, rubbing the moisture from his face.

Before he could ask Toothless if it were even possible to melt scales, the dragon pounced on the bellow.

That action was so sudden, so startling, that it took the strained groan of the handle's wood to propel Hiccup into motion.

"Toothless—no!"

Hiccup slammed into Toothless' side, knocking the dragon away from the hearth with surprising success.

The Night Fury appeared just as shocked as Hiccup for but a heartbeat, before shaking from his stupor.

::Well, you weren't making it work!::: Toothless tried to hustle Hiccup away from the hearth, but Hiccup would not budge, instead putting all his effort into shoving at the angular head.

"It's just going to take a while!"

::It will take forever if you do it!:::

"If you break this Demyan will freak out!"

::He doesn't scare me—!:::

"If we piss him off we can't use the forge—we can't get this thing finished—TOOTHLESS!"

The dragon had retracted his teeth and bit down on the arm shouldering his snout, the gums clamping down on the appendage with enough force to bruise. Hiccup found himself dangerously close to using Toothless' pressure point against him. What had gotten into him?

::You 'piss him off' every day!::: Toothless contended. His lip curled as he released a long, low snarl around the arm.

"I'm a human—ghrr—let go!"

::No! Let me use the thingy!:::

"Yes—! And no! You don't—ugh—even know—umph—what—it's—called—!"

Hiccup brought up one foot and began trying to free his arm by pushing against Toothless' cheek. Toothless winced at the contact, and the growl low in his throat rose in timbre at the human's temerity.

It was this tangled scene that greeted Doris when she entered the tent. And for all of Toothless' superior senses, for all of Hiccup's observation skills, only her soft giggle alerted them to her presence.
The dragon immediately released Hiccup's arm. Hiccup, who still pushed against Toothless' face with his foot, ended up kicking himself to the ground. He scrambled to his feet in the next instant, cursing in his head with every language he knew.

"Ah..." Hiccup tried to find the words to explain the situation, not realizing it wouldn't matter since she couldn't very well understand him. His smell, his general lack of hygiene, the soot smudges on his face, all came to his awareness as he looked at Doris' simple but pristine attire.

Doris laughed again with a gentleness about her that kept Hiccup from feeling too self-conscious. He got the impression she laughed more at his antics than at him.

"Hi," he settled on mumbling. He thought of the dream he had a couple night ago. And the one before that. And the one before that. All with her in a varying states of undress, in varying situations that involved varying activities—

Hiccup averted his eyes to the unaffected scales, his heart pounding loud in his ears. Maybe it was good he was so dirty and overheated—it would be harder for her to pinpoint his embarrassment.

He heard her approach, every action of hers brought to hyperawareness, and he returned his focus to her. Even Toothless had become part of the background; the dragon sat back on his haunches, watching the pair with interest.

Guarded, Hiccup watched as Doris gave a small, unsure glance at Toothless, and then continued closing in on the boy when the dragon did nothing to impede her. Useless reptile.

He felt close to panicking now, though his body would not move, legs locked and arms stiff at his side. She never came near him in the forge before. Was she going to kiss him again? Dear Freyja, was she going to stick her tongue in his mouth with Toothless right there?

He'd stop her this time; he was sure of it. There are some things he simply wouldn't subject Toothless to.

She came to a halt after only just breaching his personal space. She could probably smell him, and hear his uneven breathing, and see the flush in his face. Hiccup stiffened as she reached a hand towards him, his eyes following the slender, supple fingers that looked so out of place in a smithy, and did nothing as they closed around his wrist.
Once again, Hiccup allowed Doris to bring his hand to her person, and for one, ridiculous moment he thought of how dirty her hand would be now.

He hoped she didn't kiss his hand again, because that might actually make her sick considering how filthy they were.

She didn't. She examined the scars again, her eyes lingering on those she felt partially responsible for, and then she lifted her dark eyes to meet his.

"Bad," she spoke, entirely comprehensive with her limited Norse. Still holding onto his hand with her left one, she reached into a pouch at her hip, one Hiccup hadn't noticed before, and pulled out a pair of leather gloves with her right.

She forced the protective mitts in the hand she held hostage, pushing his fingers to close a grip on them.

"Good."

She gave him a large smile that Hiccup couldn't even return because his face had gone completely slack at her actions. He could only watch, speechless, as Doris gave him and Toothless each an individual, parting nod. And then she left.

Hiccup followed her with his eyes, his mouth still unhunged. It was only after the woman completely left his sight that he moved his gaze onto the gift, running a thumb over the material. They were new gloves, thick, soft and durable. He wriggled a hand inside one.

It was a close fit, with just enough wiggle room at the tip of each finger for growing. Hiccup could only blink at the gloved hand that he twisted and clenched experimentally. He'd gotten used to working without them as none ever seemed to fit him and he didn't know the first thing about making anything decent. Saddles were one thing...but gloves? It took a certain amount of finesse to craft sturdy clothes meant for hard work.

A surge of gratitude welled inside him. He didn't know if this was normal—not the gratitude, obviously—but Doris' behavior towards him, and his reactions towards her.

She noticed his burns and she did something about them...

::I want you to rut with that woman::

Hiccup fell out of his stupor.

"WHAT?" he yelped, subconsciously holding the other glove close to his chest. He stared, wide-eyed, at the dragon, wondering if he heard right.

Toothless leveled a flat stare at the human.

::I can't sleep there anymore::: 'There' being their bed. ::I can't take this anymore:::

Hiccup continued to stare at the dragon for a moment longer, experiencing another loss for words. He couldn't rightly dispute this because it was true. He felt guilty, shamefaced... confused. He didn't like his position and he didn't like that he put Toothless in an awkward position either.

He swallowed, and took a moment to slip the other glove on. Another great fit.

"I don't know what to do," he muttered. And he didn't. He figured out how to stare down opposition,
and butt heads with aggression, and physically defend himself to an extent. He figured out how to ride a dragon and negotiate with monsters and find a tentative alcohol tolerance. He could not, for the life of him, figure out his body.

::Rut with her:: Toothless repeated in a tone that suggested how obvious it was. Hiccup immediately opened his mouth to argue and Toothless cut him off. ::You are obviously in some sort of yen. I had not realized humans experienced those::

"I don't know what a yen is," Hiccup growled, running fingers through his hair. He paused at the strange feeling, looking at his hands to remember they were gloved. This was going to take some getting used to. He shook his head, taking a breath. "I'm just an exploit to her...something to brag about to her other co-workers or get her in some higher position..."

Toothless didn't see what the problem was.

::Well, it is just an activity to humans, is it not? I'm not sure if I understand this correctly, but humans seem to have physical needs for mating without the urge for offspring present. Which sounds completely unproductive::

"Yeah..." Hiccup muttered and he was unsure to which part he agreed to. "But it's more than that. She's only interested because I'm your rider. And that imbecile, Halvdan, pretty much gave her permission to try."

Hiccup suspected this could be the biggest, perhaps the only, turnoff when it came to Doris. He couldn't deny that she was attractive—older than Gudrid, certainly, but that only enhanced every womanly aspect about her. His body wanted her, it made that much clear, his head started to turn on him as well, and now his pride was torn. Torn between becoming a 'man' in this man's world and the degrading circumstances behind said activity.

::For all of Abzu's wisdom, you are quite stupid. Why would she not just want to mate with you for being a strong male?:

Hiccup scoffed.

"Um...because I'm not a strong male?"

Toothless whipped his tail so fast Hiccup had no time to dodge. It collided with his head, knocking down some overhanging tools in the process. Hiccup yelped, his hands going to the throbbing area.

::I don't let weak males ride my shoulders:: Toothless snarled, baring his teeth at the boy.

Hiccup stared at him, tenderly rubbing his head. He knew Toothless didn't like any self-deprecation on his behalf (even if this particular aspect sustained some truth to it), but usually he had more patience than this.

::She brought you oblation:: Toothless professed. ::Or, what I suspect is oblation. No female has ever presented you with an offering while giving you these kinds of attentions::

Hiccup gave his dragon the most annoyed glare he could muster, rather miffed by the violence directed at him.

"These are gloves," he intoned, even if the gesture behind them touched him. It proved Doris paid attention to his burns, anyway. "Do I even want to know what oblation is?"

::It's part of our mating rites:: Toothless explained, using a tone that suggested Hiccup should
already know such a thing. ::You first garner a female's attention by bringing her an oblation of skulls::.

Truthfully, Hiccup was a bit afraid to ask, but did so anyway.

"What kind of skulls?"

Toothless' ears perked up, all displeasure with his rider wiped from his posture.

::Magnificent kills:: he described. ::The greatest of quarry. If she accepts, she challenges you to a fight. They can last moons::

Hiccup's own irritation with the dragon slowly dimmed as Toothless squirmed and danced a bit in his place. He had not seen his friend this animated in a while. And deep down, he knew it was because of how long the dragon had been grounded.

"So this is a fight that can last days?" he asked. He wanted to keep Toothless on this high and listened with an open ear as he began slowly working the bellows again.

The dragon nodded, growing more enthusiastic by the moment.

::Oh yes. It's the greatest part. Males wait their entire lives for a female to engage in primary with him::

Hiccup was sure he had understood wrong.

"Wait...they wait for the fighting part?"

Toothless wagged his tail.

::Yes! The rutting comes after, and only if the male defeats the female. Most don't survive:: Toothless threw this out as an insignificant detail. ::Even then, actual impregnation is a rare occurrence::

"Well, that explains why the world isn't overrun with dragons," Hiccup muttered. Toothless went on as though unhearing to the commentary.

::But the primary is one of the most awaited moments in a male's lifetime. It only happens when we pass selection, often females receive multiple oblation, and even then we need to be in a mating yen at the same time as our chosen's heat:: Toothless thumped his tail on the ground much in the way someone would smack their fist on a table saying 'darn'. ::I was so close to primary—I had found the perfect female—::

It was then, as the dragon's reservations slipped, his rambling taking him too far back into dragon culture, where Hiccup's face, substrate with anticipation, had frozen with a lax jaw and focused attention—that was the moment when Toothless clammed up.

Hiccup felt disappointment slam into him with the force Mjölnir.

"So, you found a female?" He tried to maintain as much nonchalance as possible in the face of such keenness, but Toothless ignored the prompt.

::My point is, I don't know much about human mating habits, but this female wants to rut you and you clearly want to rut her—and I want you to rut her because your insanity is driving me insane!::

Hiccup allowed the change in subject, as always, when it came to pushing Toothless for details of his
past, and forced his mind onto the more necessary, albeit uncomfortable, one.

"I know...I know..." Hiccup grabbed one of the tools knocked down earlier by Toothless' tail—a pair of tongs. He went to the forgotten scales on the fire and gave them a few, experimental pokes. They seemed completely unresponsive to the heat, as solid and dead as their introduced condition.

::You don't want to marry:: Toothless stated, determined to do whatever it took to get Hiccup's full attention back on their departure.

"Yeah," Hiccup sighed. He placed the tongs on the anvil within arms reach, no miniscule shock of metal meeting metal tingled his bones; the gloves protected him from more than just heat.

::You don't want one woman for your lifetime::

"Yeah." It wasn't even an option anymore, really.

::Do you see where I'm going with this::

"I do, I swear I do." Hiccup placed one hand on the bellows, but didn't start the process again, instead turning to face Toothless. "But... I—I just don't know what I'm doing. I hate not knowing what I'm doing."

::Then you jump in with both feet:: the dragon said, sounding as if the answer were so blatant the conversation should even be taking place. ::Isn't that what you humans say? Don't you do that anyway, when you don't know something::

"Yeah, I mean, maybe, but this is women. Probably the only thing I'm ignorant and terrified of. I'm going to make a fool out of myself—I know I am—and there's no way I'm asking anyone for advice," because of pride and because he knew what sort of 'advice' it would be, "It's... it's generally an uncomfortable situation."

::Uncomfortable situations happen at night when you—::

"Alright! I get it!" Hiccup balked.

::Just promise me you'll think about it:: Toothless finished with a plead.

Hiccup bit his lip, holding the dragon's gaze for a moment, knowing that the dragon was genuine in his request. Halvdan and every other Viking probably thought they were helping Hiccup cover some sort of milestone; sometimes he felt like their pet savage they were trying to humanize. Toothless just wanted his best friend back.

His shoulders sagged and he released his lip from its capture.

"Alright. Yeah. I'll think about it."

::That's all I ask::

"So what do you say to finishing this tailfin?" It was time for a brighter theme.

::Do you need to ask::

Hiccup laughed, pushing down on the bellows. The fire flared with vivacity.

"Well, if molding doesn't work, I'll try the shingling idea. If worst comes to worse I'll just re-weight it. I swear, I'll have us up in the air three days at the—"
A bear-like roar sounded from the other side of the tent—one that most likely echoed to the Sea of Marmara's very shores. The boys bore witness to Demyan's ruddy cheeks darkening into an unflattering puce that brought out the grey hairs in his all-consuming hair.

Demyan did not move for a moment. Hiccup could see his rage collecting like the rising bubbles in an over-boiled pot of water. Eventually it became too much, and words and spittle flew from the fat lips.

"This not clean! And! And!—And you have dragon here!"

"I was cleaning it right now!" Hiccup insisted before slipping from the side of his mouth, "Toothless, you need to run."

::I don't think I should leave you here with him. He looks deranged::<

"He usually looks like that. I'll be fine."

"I keel you!" Demyan promised, leaking credit from Hiccup's statement. "I smash head vith anvil! I burn feet with fire!"

"Calm down!" Hiccup yelled, managing to match the giant man's volume. "If you kill me you'll have to clean it!"

::You should run too::<

Toothless tried to tug Hiccup out by the apron. Hiccup swatted at the scaled head, keeping his eyes on Demyan.

"I can't leave all our stuff here," he hissed. "I need this forge!"

"I keel dragon!" Demyan continued to rave, "Моя кузня! Испоганили мои инструменты—!"

::Is he insulting me::<

"Toothless just leave!"

::I'm not in the mood to be insulted::<

"Такую тварь лучше осквернять и сварить из нее суп!"

::That was an insult! I could tell::<

Hiccup massaged his temples, trying to quell the pounding that had started up. He had a feeling he was going to drink tonight. He had to find some outlet for the stress of a grounded life.

########

A Night Fury could transform into nothing but a pair of glowing eyes in the darkness, an ability that churned myths and horror stories among northern-dwelling humans for centuries. Toothless aligned his body along the very edge of a bathhouse roof, across the street from a tavern, melting into the night as only a shadow could. Invisible to the few humans outside at this hour, the dragon allowed a short while to revel in the cloak of solitude. In the moment where the moon commanded the sky and creatures of every niche altered their activity, the dragon could pretend he was back with his drove,
back with the skydancing and firecircles and moonhowls.

That was a lifetime ago. He knew this, he accepted it, but he cherished the memories as one would cherish childhood.

Toothless rather liked the nights of Miklagard. The air cooled considerably, free from the sun's influence, but a warm current remained that curled around his back and tail like caressing hands. The cats would flock to him like children, no longer distracted by human attentions, bearing gifts of fish and meats, and they would sing to him in a unit of purrs and chorus of yowls. The occasional human would voice a complaint, but one roar from Toothless usually sent them scurrying back inside. He would not have his tribute disturbed.

Yes, Toothless enjoyed the nightlife more than any other time in this city, but he was more than ready to leave it. An ache for the skies plagued his heart, a yearning and a pull so powerful that he felt less and less in control of his actions. He grew jumpy, impatient, overly animated and yet...a weight, a sense of melancholy, depressed any positive feelings he might incur. Most frightening of all, with this lack of control came the instincts to tear into human flesh. He had to make himself scarce in the daytime; he had to stick close by Hiccup because Hiccup brought forth the humanity within that helped him keep his wits.

It was a sickness that troubled him, the same that took the mind of any dragon left flightless for too long, and the only cure lie far above the highest human structure.

Only the thought of being so close to flying kept Toothless from fully giving into his impulse to start killing. As long as he had his human he could stave off this madness with time to spare. It was his love for Hiccup that had him agreeing to the boy's need to experiment. It was a good idea to camouflage and fireproof the tailfin, in the future it may even save them, but Toothless' need to attain altitude had him rushing the boy's intellect.

Maybe Hiccup would have already figured out a way to form the scales if he hadn't interfered? Of course, the fight he started with Demyan probably didn't help matters, but at least they were leaving soon enough that Hiccup wouldn't have to suffer the unsettling scrutiny of the smith.

Things would also speed along if Hiccup could get a full night's rest...

Toothless turned his eyes on his human, his superior eyesight catching details through darkness and space, even with only the squares of insight called windows granting him true vision. The boy sat at a table with that large fellow, Halvdan, looking irritated with the man but the tension in his shoulders had lessened since earlier that day.

Toothless saw some of the same symptoms in the boy as he felt himself, and he knew Hiccup suffered from this grounded life as well. It was winding them both up, affecting their minds, their judgment, their concentration. They needed the air and their freedom and each other. Too many others had interfered with their time and activity.

Toothless' ear plates shot to attention when he saw Doris approach Hiccup from behind. She placed a hand on his shoulder, and Hiccup turned. Toothless could see Hiccup's grip on his tankard in a short spasm as he looked into the woman's face. Doris said something, but the din leaking from the walls of the tavern screened the words. Toothless didn't think most of them were in Norse anyhow.

Doris bent down, the look on her face tender, and she grabbed Hiccup's forearm, coaxing him from his seat.

*Come on, Hiccup...do it for you...*
Perhaps fueled by Toothless’ silent encouragement, this time, Hiccup allowed Doris to pull him away from drink and the laughing men. Toothless saw Hiccup gesture something to the Vikings that had them laughing even more, something he suspected meant unkindness, before Doris and Hiccup disappeared from view.

A beat later and the tavern door opened, releasing heat and singing and laughter into the night before Hiccup shut it once more behind him. Doris continued to lead Hiccup down the street, back to the palace. Hiccup swayed a couple times, but otherwise kept signs of inebriation from sight. Toothless could make out the color on the boy’s cheeks that spread down his neck and beneath his tunic; this usually symbolized embarrassment, but Toothless didn’t think an embarrassed Hiccup would stop Doris three buildings down into their journey and kiss her against a clay wall, much as she had done to him days before.

Toothless turned away from the enthusiastic pair and slunk into the shadows. He had much to learn about human mating rites, but he’d rather hear about them than bear witness.

########

Toothless held a high expectation for the satiation of Hiccup's yen, a hope which soon dipped into disappointment after a short walk by the boy’s side.

Hiccup made his way to the Hippodrome for a morning spar with Harald, unhurried and pensive. He hardly acknowledged Toothless when the dragon hopped down from a high perch, scaring some pedestrians into screams that may have never met the boy's ears for all his reaction.

Toothless didn't say anything for the duration of the walk. He stared at his human's profile, trying to place to expression on the young man's face. He seemed so...subdued. Shouldn't he be happy? Relieved?

He appeared relaxed at least, which was more than Toothless could say for himself.

The Hippodrome slid into sight when Hiccup finally broke the silence.

"Toothless I..." he exhaled heavily, shaking his head. "I shouldn't have done that. Why did I do that?"

It sounded as if Hiccup only meant to talk to himself, but Toothless responded anyway.

::You don't feel better?::

Hiccup grimaced, glancing down at the dragon and then up ahead again.

"I do feel better...but, at the same time I don't. I'm...I don't know...I guess I'm disappointed in myself. I mean, she's a prostitute—courtesan—whatever—it's still kind of...low of me...right?"

Hiccup couldn't seriously expect Toothless to answer that; he didn't understand a single thing about human mating rites, let alone their standards.

Slowly, Toothless struggled to piece together some kind of consolation.

::Humans seem to only engage in rutting during mating—and if the desire to rut is there, but no need for offspring...then the partner shouldn't matter too much...should it?::
A small, strained smile found its way onto Hiccup's face. It was a start.

"That's...simplifying it."

::I think you just like complicating things:: Toothless went on. ::You did it again this morning, so it must have been an enjoyable activity::

Hiccup sucked in a sharp breath.

"Wait... How did you know that?" he hissed, his eyes bulging.

Going by the loss of color in the freckled cheeks, Toothless got the impression Hiccup already suspected the answer.

They entered the outer wall of the Hippodrome and the dragon responded truthfully, refusing to feel ashamed.

::I wanted to see if you were done yet. And you weren't::

"You—you—you—watched!" The boy made an odd yelping sound at the end of the sentence, like a hatching that had its tail trodden on.

Toothless at least had the decency to lower his ear plates in a wince.

::I didn't stay long... I was curious!::

"Oh gods," Hiccup moaned, rubbing a hand over his face.

::I just don't understand why it's all about the rutting!::

The human looked faint, pale, even as they re-emerged in the sunlight.

"Shut up...just...shut up for a moment..."

::Is it that gratifying?::

"Toothless, please..."

Hiccup stopped walking steps into the 'Drome as the perfect distraction to Toothless' embarrassing prodding materialized before him. It was not Harald who greeted him this morning, but Halvdan, swinging his rhomphaia.

And Halvdan was smiling. Halvdan would not stop smiling.

The hairs on Hiccup's neck rose. He could feel his hackles rise for reasons he couldn't place and his body tensed as he continued his journey to the center of the arena.

"Where's Harald?" Hiccup asked by way of saying 'good morning'.

"Takin' a day off," Halvdan shrugged, that galling smile still present. "Thought I'd take over for the day."

"Did you?" Hiccup muttered, sparing a glance where Toothless had climbed up on the stands.

"Aye," Halvdan grinned. "Doris said you have a lot 'o potential."
Hiccup, who had been about to take his sabre from his belt, stiffened.

"What?" He spoke softly, a dangerous edge in his voice and, if possible, Halvdan's smile grew wider.

"Ran into her just before I came here. Said you were a fast learner."

Hiccup's face heated. His blood ran cold.

"She told you that, did she?" He knew it was a bad idea. He knew it.

Halvdan laughed, planting the head of his axe in the dirt and leaning on its handle like a stand. The wood lining cried in protest to the weight.

"Might of heckled her of bit—ah, don't be like that now! It's all in good fu—"

Hiccup wasn't sure how it happened. One moment he was focusing on the tremble of his arms, and the next he was standing over Halvdan, the man flat-backed on the ground, smile absent, a hand cupping his mouth instead where Hiccup had struck him.

"Oi!" Halvdan hissed. He sat up quickly, looking at the dabbles of blood on his fingers where his own tooth cut his lip. "What the bleedin' Hel was that about?"

Hiccup's fist was still clenched, but the initial indignation-fueled rage had released with the punch. He wouldn't apologize. It was far too satisfying to forcibly take a smile from someone like Halvdan's face.

He did, however, hold out a hand.

"You're the biggest troll I've ever met," he informed the man. When Halvdan made no motion to accept the offer to stand, Hiccup added, "Consider that payment for shooting Toothless out of the sky."

::Thank you!:: Hiccup heard the dragon call across the stadium.

His lips quirked into a smile, one that spurred the Viking into gripping the outstretched hand. Hiccup gave a slight grunt as he helped the man to his feet.

"Al'right then," Halvdan conceded once fully upright. He wiped the collected dust from his trousers. "I suppose that evens things out a bit. I'll admit to not seeing that coming—"

Hiccup punched the other half of Halvdan's mouth as the man's eyes were lowered to examine the blood wiped from his lip. Halvdan stumbled badly, and only just managed to keep his feet under him. He didn't investigate the damage this time, he didn't react to any pain he may have felt; he only stared at Hiccup as though seeing someone else entirely.

"WHAT THE EFFIN' HEL ARE YOU PLAYIN' AT?" All the friendly composure that Halvdan managed to throw around everyday expunged from his body.

Hiccup smiled, experiencing a dark pleasure in trampling Halvdan's blithe spirits.

"That was for hitting me."

"That—that was months ago!" Halvdan exclaimed, aghast.

"Still happened."
"You want to fight, do yeh?" Halvdan gripped his rhomphaia and for the first time Hiccup beheld the creature enemies of the Væringjar faced. The snarling, wild barbarians of legend. "I'll give you a fight."

Hiccup welcomed the change in demeanor and readied his sword. Halvdan charged.

"I still owe you one more for forcing a prostitute on me," Hiccup tossed in, trotting backwards out of swinging range. Unlike Harald, Halvdan couldn't quite control his momentum as well, probably too used to meeting opponents head on, and it took him an instant longer to recover from the miss. An instant in battle could mean life or death.

"Will you stop calling her that?" Halvdan swung the axe so hard it impacted the dirt with a resounding thud. Hiccup would have pressed his advantage if Halvdan didn't have, and demonstrate, the ability to rip the weapon from such deep embedment with seemingly no effort. "She's a good lass. A courtesan—"

"Who cares if she lives in the palace—" Hiccup blocked a side swing and found his weight shoved a great distance to the side, his feet leaving skid marks in the upended dirt. He grunted under the strain of the blow. "It's still just a job to her!"

"You know nothing about her," Halvdan went on, frustration remaining on his face as Hiccup became harder and harder to hit. Why didn't Harald warn him about this kid? It was like trying to hit a gnat with a hammer! "She was married as a girl to some counsel member thrice her age—"

Hiccup hopped away from another down swing, only commenting with an, "Ew."

Halvdan puffed from the wasted exertion he put into each strike, and he slowed in his ferocity.

"He wanted heirs and she was such a pretty thing..." As Halvdan let up, Hiccup eased his stance as well. "Couldn't give him any so he got rid of her and got himself a new wife."

Hiccup narrowed his eyes.

"How do you just 'get rid of' your wife? For not having kids?"

Divorce was rare enough with Vikings, but from all he knew of the South it was all but unheard of.

Halvdan shrugged, his own moment of rage subsiding as he took his moment of dialogue to catch his breath. "An official that high up? They can pretty much do as they please if they're sneaky enough about it. He had far more credence than her, spread enough rumors to disgrace her and was granted an annulment. She had nothing to her name, faced a lot of strife for it, but she was such a sweet lass that Halvdan and Bolli convinced the empress to let her live as a courtesan. She adjusted to the life well enough."

"All because she couldn't give him kids?" Hiccup wondered aloud. Something irked him to no end about such a fate. Doris couldn't help the way she was born. Vikings would adopt or find a surrogate mother—legitimacy didn't have to come through blood, unlike with the South. To live in ridicule simply because she didn't live up to the standards of a backwards society...

He bit his lip. She slept with men to stay in the palace, she slept with him because...well, he wasn't rightly sure anymore. Possibly because Halvdan paid her in misguided kindness, possibly because Hiccup was the rider, though neither explained why she gave so much consideration to his burns. She paid special attention to the scar on his back that morning, when the sunlight brought it to visibility, kissing its length and murmuring words in Greek he could only guess at.
That didn't seem like things a prostitute would do—to show care towards someone's blemishes. It seemed like something a lover would do.

"Aye," Halvdan agreed solemnly, breaking Hiccup from his thoughts. "More barren than an ale barrel on Jól!"

Vexation rattled Hiccup. And so he punched Halvdan in the face for a third time that morning.

"WHAT THE—!"

"That was for clearly skipping Laugardagur."

"GIT OVER HERE!"

"Look! I just can't get them hot enough!"

Sweat poured down the sides of Hiccup's face, stinging his eyes with salt and smudged ash. His arms ached from working the bellows over and over and over again.

Toothless provided Hiccup with more and more scales over the next day, but no matter how much he stoked the fire, the flame would not affect them.

Shingling them proved just as fruitless, as anytime he did manage to pierce them no amount of precision would keep the entire scale from cracking. They either shattered or proved indestructible. They were a blacksmith's nightmare material.

::I can't say I'm surprised:: Toothless yawned. He scratched his ear plate with his back paw. ::Even when separated from my body they're flame retardant:::

"I was so sure an extension of time would do it..." Hiccup mumbled, staring at the pile of fire-immune scales.

::Just re-weight it:: The dragon ordered. Hiccup looked pained.

"Can't we just...I don't know...there's nothing else we can try?" Hiccup didn't want to give up on this. He hated giving up in the midst of creation. He reached for the bellow one more time. "Maybe if we just keep at it for—"

::Will you leave that alone!:: Toothless snapped and he shot a plasma bolt at the hearth, sending Hiccup leaping back with a loud cry ::I'm tired of waiting—I can't wait anymore! I need to fly::

"What is wrong—" Hiccup cut his own words off so abruptly that it looked as if he physically swallowed the rest of them. Sorrow read all over his face as he regarded his dragon. He would not finish the statement. Not when he knew the answer clear as day.

"You're right," he said softly. "You're right. I'm so sorry. You're right. I'm wasting time, this was pointless and I've just kept you—both of us—here."

Hiccup's apology, his acknowledgement of the problem without Toothless having to shove it in his face, helped the dragon calm down. He sat back on his tail and nudged the box of excess materials
over to Hiccup.

::Let's just get back in the air, shall we?::

Hiccup grinned, "Yeah...you're right. But first I need to clean a few things up from a certain explosion before Demyan get's...here..."

::If you finish the tail-fin then we can leave without cleaning up, and he won't be able to do a thing about it:::

"Toothless..."

::What?::

Hiccup didn't answer, and Toothless followed the human's gaze to the hearth where the fire had darkened into a deep brown—color he had never seen a flame burn with, not in all his years of encountering dragons.

However, it was not the fire that captured Hiccup's attention. It was the scales within that unique, brown flame—scales that had jellified. A blue-black mess molded over the heated rocks within the fire, the very edges dribbling onto hissing stones in inky globs.

"Your fire..." Hiccup breathed. He began hitting Toothless's shoulder with the back of his hand just in case the dragon wasn't paying attention.

Toothless shook his head, unwilling to let Hiccup finish the statement.

::No. That makes no sense... My scales can withstand dragon fire. Most dragon's can:::

Hiccup's face contorted with thought. "If my fire couldn't do it, and your fire couldn't do it, then maybe..."

He turned his head, ever so slowly, to meet Toothless' matching eyes, and the dragon caught on immediately.

::Human and dragon fire can?::

The smile on Hiccup's face could only be called maniacal. For once, Toothless welcomed it.

"We're getting out of here soon buddy."

::I guess if we're doing it in style, I can wait one more day:::

"That's all I ask."  

########

They spent the entire day in the forge. Hiccup created molds, experimented in mixing Toothless' blue flame with different temperatures of human fire, until he discovered the perfect consistency to shape the scales. And when Demyan tried to kick them out they took the forge by force, with Toothless showing him the true fury of TatqiqKivgaq.

The tailfin would not match 'Toothless' real one in terms of texture—it would have a smooth, but
protective casing. After much trial and error, Hiccup managed to successfully spread it thin to maintain a component of elasticity, but, once solidified, it would harden back into its former consistency. The scales were slow to cool and, to be safe, Hiccup decided to let the finished project sit out the night.

Their morning would begin with healing winds.

Hiccup lay in bed now, sprawled out with one leg free of the blankets and a hand resting by Toothless’ knee. The dragon looked at his human, at the youth that resurfaced when such a deep unawareness took hold, and a heavy appreciation for having such a creature in his life cocooned his heart. He lost so much and he gained so much, simply because this rawboned human had tailprodded his way into his life. He found the odds of such a fate to be in his favor. Tailfin or no tailfin, this was who he wanted by his side. All of this—from the square teeth to the uneven fur—this was his other half.

Toothless gave a soft lick to Hiccup's cheek (the boy had the gall to scowl even when dreaming!) and he left the bed. He made no effort to keep quiet and his tail thumped the ground as it dragged behind him. Hiccup wouldn't be asleep for much longer.

Toothless exited the room and paused to look at the woman pressed against the wall at the door's edge. She sucked in her breath at the pair of feline-like eyes pinning her and her intentions, but she stood her ground and held Toothless' gaze in that moment, unmoving, unbreathing, waiting for something. A signal. A gesture.

After a time of unending silence, Toothless gave her a deliberate nod—acknowledgement, greeting, permission?—the human didn't know. She couldn't understand the dragon as Hiccup could. But she took it as a 'yes' in every sense of the word, and without lingering in the presence of the Great Dragon or trying to touch him or spend any inordinate amount of time admiring the shine of his scales in the window-filtered moonlight, Doris entered Hiccup's bedroom without a second thought.

Toothless continued on his trek to escape the palace, ready to make the most of his last night of being grounded.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Hiccup's not a virgin. Sound the alarms. I wasn't exactly subtle in the last couple chapters so no one better act shocked. Let's not put Victorian concepts of virginity into a medieval setting read by a modern audience. Please.

Anyway, yay for leaving Miklagard! Those boys are more than ready to hightail it out of there. Are you as excited as they are? You can't be! You are not a fictional character.

Curious about Toothless' dragonly past? Thought Halvdan should have had a fourth punch to the face? Should Hiccup invent the deadbolt?
Chapter Summary

The boys are back in the air, but the empire doesn't want to quite let them go.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cured

"Toothless, stop it!"

Hiccup's laugh, lost to the winds the moment it left his mouth, took much edge out of his command. After all, how could he ever feel annoyed with the soul who helped him touch the skies?

They had done it—they were doing it. The sun warmed them, the winds chilled them, and the sparkles atop the water passed by so quickly they appeared as nothing more than streaks of white-gold flashes.

Hiccup breathed deeply, filling his body with the purest air in the world, seasoned by the salted seas. He could taste the ocean, and the sun, and the clouds; he could feel the swathing high winds embrace him, welcoming him back into their care. His hair whipped around his face, covering his eyes in the wildest moment of a spin or flip, aiding the bliss, the euphoria, that enraptured his senses.

They had been at it since before the daylight broke the night and, going by the sun, Hiccup reckoned they now approached mid-morning. Neither male carried the inclination to settle. Months of pent up frustration and confinement had to be soothed, and they would take as long as they needed to feel whole again.

Toothless had dragged Hiccup out of bed with nothing more than blue light in the pre-dawn to help him dress. Doris still slept beneath the wrinkled linen, the form of her body rising and falling with each breath, and Hiccup was careful to preserve her modesty as he attempted to untangle himself from the sheets without waking her.

Very few people were up and about so early; Hiccup and Toothless took advantage of this fact by taking off right outside the palace. They couldn't wait to find a more secluded spot, not with the tailfin attached and the saddle on, and a compulsion to fly so strong it was a miracle they didn't burst through the window.

People screamed, of course. The handful fortunate enough to witness their leave reacted with fright and awe, but the sounds fell on deaf ears. Hiccup and Toothless immediately headed south, away from the city, and the eyes, and the pointed fingers, and over the Sea of Marmara where not even bola-nets could catch them.

Like nature intended it, Hiccup's foot moved the pedal as if he were nothing more than a conscious thought of Toothless'. The instincts were still there, Toothless flew as if he only knew how to fly with a human on his back, and they took to the skies like a bird released from its cage, no discord in their movements.
Again, Toothless curled his head and tail beneath his body, balling in a way that had them quickly losing altitude. Only the sheer height at which they soared stayed the possibility of danger.

The sudden drop and loss of control left Hiccup's stomach behind in the strongest tickling sensation, and his cry of shock quickly morphed into a delighted howl.

"Toothless!"

::I'm sorry! I can't help it!::

It was worth the wait, the dragon decided, if it meant perfecting the tailfin in such a manner. Perhaps it was easier to think such a thing now that they were in the air and all was right in the world again, but he couldn't get over how much it looked like his tail was whole again. At a glance he could pretend this was his real tail, if he missed the different texture and slight variations in shape. Hiccup moved it in perfect sync with his real fin, and, coupled with the phantom sensations that still, to this day, plagued him, he could watch both fins work and feel whole.

His human had done it again; he had taken creativity and ingenuity to a whole new level.

The dragon squashed down the urge to try and look at his tailfin, yet again, when Hiccup nudged them into a dive that he wholeheartedly accepted. They corkscrewed in their descent, spinning so tightly that any passenger would be traumatized. But Hiccup was no passenger. He was every bit a part of the ride.

They pulled out of the maneuver just before hitting the water, leveling out faster than any eye could follow, the tips of Toothless' claws skimming the waves.

"Again!" Hiccup cried. His foot tugged into third position, and they began another steep ascent.

Gods, how had he survived these past months touching only the earth? How had he survived before flying? Was there a life before flying? Hiccup tried to imagine ever existing without knowing this feeling and found such memories unattainable.

Life before Toothless had been a daze. Numb. Cold. Completely forgettable. Never did he think he could feel as he did now; weightless, breathless, senseless. A cleansing awareness so powerful, it drove him into nirvana. Refreshing and rejuvenating. Beautiful. Heartwarming and bone chilling in every rise and every fall. Indescribable.

His mind felt clearer than it had in weeks. The world was bright once again, now nothing more than an ocean of endless possibilities.

::I never want to go down!:: Toothless roared as they peaked in a backward loop. Hiccup laughed, free and easy, as he hung upside-down in the suspended moment, his arms spread wide, as if to catch every positive feeling waiting for them in the sky, before turning the movement into another dive.

Nowhere else in the world could he feel like this. Not in Midgard. Not in Asgard. They soared someplace in between, where the vortex of screaming winds could drown out his own. This was their world.

"Trust me, I know the feeling," he yelled into the bluster burning his face. It was impossible to fall this fast, you had to mean to do it. "But we'll have to eventually!"

::We could leave! We could leave right now!:: Toothless suggested, and Hiccup knew the dragon was quite serious.
"All my stuff is back there!"

::I dearly hope that "all my stuff" does not include the Woman::

"What? No!"

Hiccup slapped one of Toothless ear fins for the comment...which came right back up to slap him. Anticipating this, Hiccup deflected it with his hand by slapping it down again. Toothless began shaking his head side to side, and for a moment their airborne exploits curbed as ear-plates versus hands took place.

::Stop it!:: Toothless finally growled when his plates began to sting. ::You're going to make me fall!::

"You stop it!"

::You hit me first!::

"You implied something stupid!"

::::I did?:::

"I'm not taking Doris!"

::Well, I had to be sure...:::

"Honestly!"

Toothless let loose a firebolt directly into their course. Hiccup yelped, switched to second and upended them just in time. The reddening flame passed over Toothless' belly.

::He can be taught!::

"Jerk!" Hiccup was laughing again. He couldn't seem to stop laughing. Toothless could fly them through all the fireballs he wanted, the smile would not leave Hiccup's face.

::Let's never get captured again::: Toothless sighed. He missed this. He missed their stunts and their unity and their games.

Hiccup scratched a dry patch of scales just behind the dragon's jaw frills by way of an apology for hurting his plates.

"Agreed."

#{}

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#{}

Returning from their flight turned out to be a bit trickier than their take-off. For one thing, cloudless skies and bright daylight put them in clear visibility. The streets were packed, so the likelihood of landing without causing a commotion was nonexistent. And, having not told anyone they would be surfing the skies that morning, there also lay the slight possibility of being shot down again.
But Toothless' wings needed to rest and Hiccup needed to eat. Their solution: land fast before anyone realized who, or what, they were.

All of Toothless' speed and all of Hiccup's agility went into swooping just beyond the walls. They didn't want to land too close to the palace on the chance that someone would attack. Hiccup felt the first tendrils of fear curl within his stomach as they rocketed towards the ground; he tried to focus on their landing point—a rather bare-looking street—but his eyes continually darted from side-to-side, his body tense with the anticipation of having to suddenly veer off course.

Nothing came besides screams and cheers. They landed, a little more roughly than usual, and that could have been from either a lack of practice or the distraction of an anticipated assault.

The bystanders were considerate enough to award them a wide berth. Even those that didn't see them land knew what happened upon seeing Toothless suited up in his flying gear, and Hiccup flush-faced and breathless. Those witnessing their departure probably couldn't keep their mouths shut, and, like any good city gossip, it spread faster than the driest fire. Whispers and stares followed them all the way to the palace steps, much like their first walk to that point. But this time Hiccup wasn't miserable and in pain. This time he had an uncontrollable smile adorning his face.

"You went flyin'?" Halvdan's voice broke through the hum of murmurs. Civilians were bodily thrown from his path as he made his way towards the pair until he could walk on Hiccup's other side. "Why didn't you tell me you were going flyin'?"

"Trust me, you were still asleep," Hiccup said, impassively, "And its not like you could have flown with me."

"But I wanted to see it!" Halvdan's whine would have seemed out of place coming from such a large body had Hiccup not spent the last couple months getting to know him. "You did see it," the boy reminded him. "And then you shot me down."

"Ah, that don't count! You were just an ickle speck..." Halvdan pinched his fingers together. "Like that! Nothing to be seen."

Hiccup shared a humorless look with Toothless as they climbed the stairs. He would have responded to Halvdan if the sudden pain in his inner thighs and hips didn't seize much of his attention. He bit his lip to hold off the wince, not wanting to alert anyone to his discomfort. It had been a while since he'd flown, this should not have been unexpected, and Hiccup knew tomorrow it would only hurt worse. Joy.

With an audible sigh of relief, Hiccup and his companions finished their journey up the stairs and made it into the palace halls, now shaded from the sun by the high-arched ceiling and protected from the enlivened crowd.

Hiccup's relief was short lived as, waiting for him, with two Væringjar escorts, was Empress Zoe. She stood tall, flawless in complexion and clothing, and bore a welcoming smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

Empress," Hiccup addressed respectfully.

"Rider," she responded in like and Hiccup had to bite his cheek to keep from frowning. "You are flying again, yes?" She asked this cordially, perfectly composed and showing nothing but honest
"Yes," Hiccup responded, just as kindly. "We're flying."

"You must be quite-happy." Zoe appeared to direct this question at Toothless, giving the dragon a fond smile. Toothless responded with a toothless beam and a wiggling tail that had even her attendants smiling.

"Does this mean you will be leaving-soon?"

Hiccup put on his best 'shocked' face.

"Oh, no! I'm in no hurry! Unless..." he hesitated, appearing bashful, "you want me to leave? I can go if that's the case..."

Zoe shook her head, somehow appearing both rushed and poised in the action. "Certainly not! I wish for you staying for as long as you are-happy."

Relief washed over Hiccup's features. "Oh thank you!"

From beyond the figure of royalty, Hiccup saw Halvdan's eyes narrow. Perhaps, in his persistence to befriend Hiccup, he found the boy's willingness to stay insincere.

Toothless crooned and nudged the small of Hiccup's back in a show of impatience. Hiccup sent the dragon a mental thanks for the excuse to leave.

"Well, he's tired and I need to wash up, so..."

"Of course," Zoe relented. "I simply wanted you to-know you are most wanted here."

Hiccup kept his smile up as he nodded considerately to the empress.

"Thank you, very much."

With a hand resting on Toothless' head, he and the dragon began a leisurely stroll to their quarters, leaving Halvdan, his comrades, and the empress behind to start up an exchange in rapid Greek.

It was only as he turned his back to the party that Hiccup allowed his features to darken.


Hiccup found himself in quite the dilemma. On one hand, he wanted to spend all of his time in the air, as no amount of flying could reasonably sate his renewed need for it. On the other hand, he wanted to explore every possibility available with his newfound dragon-scale material.

He also wanted to leave. But leaving meant a distinct lack of forge.

Thankfully, with a dragon in much better spirits and, therefore, more likely to humor him, Hiccup had worked out a temporary schedule that allowed him to have both. The pattern the boys fell into worked to both their advantage and, had they managed it in the very beginning of their stay, Hiccup would have found the entire Miklagard experience far more enjoyable.
They spent their mornings and nights flying, able to bask in the most magnificent moments of every sunrise and sunset. A crowd gathered whenever they took off or landed, which was why they tried to keep to the darker hours—but the attention was hardly worth caring for after a good fix of aeroplay.

Hiccup's nights often ended in a visit from Doris, who stayed until the morning, disappearing by the time Hiccup got back from his daytime flight. After the first two nights of this, Hiccup hunted down Halvdan and told him to stop paying Doris to sleep with him; the Viking reacted with bewilderment that Hiccup knew to be sincere, as a roguish grin and much elbow-nudging soon followed it. The young man still hadn't quite grasped the reason for the courtesan's attentions, especially if money was taken out of the equation. He didn't know if he was convenient or simply entertaining, and, after some introspection, he found reasons no longer mattered to him. She added a component to his life he never knew was absent—human touch—and he wouldn't challenge it.

The forge occupied Hiccup's afternoons; his insane desire to master this new material keeping him in the smithy for an obscene portion of the day. He had already filled half of his notebook with blurbs of potential uses and sketched possibilities.

He found the main problem with scales and brown fire lie in its intensity. The scales became too jellied and, while easier to mold, he had to wait until they cooled before he could quench them and that took away far too much control on the smith's part. It took days, but through thorough experimentation Hiccup learned to heat his fire to an orange hue, and then wait several moments after Toothless' fire was added. The brown fire would start to gradate back into an orange tone, starting at the very tips of its fire, and *that* was when the scales would soften just enough to be hammered into shape.

Toothless spent his afternoons sleeping, usually after Hiccup no longer needed his fire, as his nights were occupied by cats and exploration. Demyan had Banished-With-No-Exceptions Toothless from the smithy. This meant the dragon lurked within the neighboring rug tent, popping his head up and shooting fire into the hearth whenever Hiccup gave the signal.

Which, in a soft snap of those human fingers, was right now.

Toothless peeked his wide face over the small barrier and shot a compact bolt at flame within the hearth, once he confirmed that Demyan faced away.

The fire blazed for a moment before settling into its deep, brown color.

Demyan, still mad about Hiccup's "hostile takeover" days ago, grunted at the change in lighting, and whirled around to face the teen. It took Hiccup flaunting the ruby in his face, and eventually buying him some liquor called medovukha to get Demyan to let him back in the forge. Regrettably, the man now watched him like a hawk.

"Vhat vas zat?" the Russian asked with heavy suspicion in his eyes. They darted between the strangely colored flame and the annoying wretch.

"Nothing," Hiccup droned. He stuck his workpiece into the flames as soon as he saw the first hints of orange appear, withdrawing it after a beat and returning it to the anvil.

"You filthy *vsadnik*...you filthy lee-ar."

Hiccup ignored the insult, giving the shape of molten scales a rapid series of light taps with a small hammer. He really just needed to smooth out the kinks on this one and it would be finished. He was positive he got the measurements perfect.
"You gaytting fee-er everywhere!"

"No I'm not!" Hiccup hissed. He quickly smudged out some fallen embers with his foot, determined to appear innocent.

"Да! Бесполезная часть дерьма..."

::We need to leave soon:: Toothless threw in from his hiding place.

"Do we ever," Hiccup murmured to the rugs. Stifling work environment aside, Hiccup had received more visits from Zoe than he cared for. She always maintained the same level of politeness when addressing him, but her enrapture with Toothless had only grown every time the dragon took to the skies.

The Væringjar kept a keen eye on him as well, tracking his schedule and most likely reporting everything they learned to the Empress. He was continually asked to go out drinking with them, always asked for a spar, which he declined more and more often in favor of the forge or flying. These could have been attempts to integrate him deeper into the community or to keep a better watch on him. Whatever the reason, Zoe obviously wanted Hiccup in the city, and that made him want to leave all the more.

"Who you talk to?" Demyan's gruff voice sounded loudly in Hiccup's ears, even from across the tent.

"Myself," Hiccup intoned. He spun a finger around his ear. "I'm crazy, remember?"

Demyan sniffed and rubbed his nose with a dirty thumb, leaving a smudge of black on the florid skin. "You crazy, da. You nayed pooting down, leek vild dog."

The comment fluttered past Hiccup's ears. He grasped his project with a pair of forceps and submerged it into the slack tub. Steam rose from the brine with a snake's hiss.

As his workpiece cooled he thought of Doris, and how the Empress must have known about them given her interest in his activities. There were times when he wondered if Doris was in on this subtle plot to get him to stay as well. It would explain her increased interest in him after they regained their ability to fly. Perhaps money was involved...

Then there were times when Doris curled into his side during the night, wanting to be held, or when she met his eyes in the throes of their intimacy, baring nothing but tenderness. Those were the times when he felt her timing was just a coincidence. His desire to believe she was interested in him for him could be blinding him to the truth, but he wanted to remain ignorant. Just for a while longer.

He didn't completely lose his senses to think he could trust her not to report on him. Hiccup remained discreet in his packing. He made sure to have clothes and the odd weapon lying around to screen that the majority of his bags were cleared away.

He went to the library in whatever free time he could scrounge up, browsing through books as inconspicuously as possible, stashing the odd map into his belt when he thought no one was looking. He had Toothless begin to gather various supplies during the night; the Night Fury, nearly untraceable in the dark, made for the perfect collector. They would leave this city richer than they arrived.

"You hogging tub."

Hiccup sighed and pulled the arm-brace from the slack tub. The blue-black cuff gleamed in the firelight, slick with salted water and sleek in its make. It would protect his arms when—and if—he
used Framherja. Hopefully it would protect him from dragon fire as well. It was perfect.

"Ugly."

And most definitely not ugly.

The boy rolled his eyes before sending Demyan a glower.

"You're ugly."

"What was zat?"

"I said you look snuggly. Want to cuddle?"

Demyan lowered his head and leveled such a dark look at Hiccup that he took a step back.

"Someday I take neck and нарежьтеэтооткрытыйкакфрукты..."

Hiccup knew he should be thankful he couldn't understand the rest of that threat. That didn't stop him from returning the scowl.

Soon. Soon, he would leave a ruby for Demyan to find, and he'd be halfway across the empire before anyone realized he was missing.

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A warm hand rested against his stomach. A cold muzzle nudged at his face.

Hiccup wrinkled his nose, unconsciously pressing back into the body behind him to escape the fish-laden breath.

"You got into the haddock again, didn't you?" He mumbled half into the pillow. His eyelids didn't want to open and he had no intention of forcing them to. He was warm and comfortable, the air hadn't become too hot just yet and the bed felt much too welcoming to leave. Maybe just a few more moments...

::Up. Fly time::
Hiccup groaned. How could he pit the desire to stay in bed against the need to fly?

He couldn't.

"Fine..." he whispered hoarsely. Waking up at such an hour always turned into a task, but Hiccup knew from experience that the morning grumpiness would flee almost as soon as he situated himself in the saddle.

He pushed himself into a seated position, the sheets pooling around his waist, and he took a moment to rub the sleep from his eyes.

"Did you get the bag?" he managed to get out before a yawn overtook his mouth. Toothless gestured to the wall with his head, where a large, durable bag lay crumpled on the floor. Hiccup had picked it out the day before, subtly pointing it out to Toothless, knowing he desperately needed an upgrade to host all of his belongings.

"Thanks," he muttered. Hopefully the dragon had left the coins he set aside for it as well.

He steeled himself to face the chill of the morning, gripping the sheets to pull them back.

"Μείνε," a soft voice breathed in his ear.

Hiccup jerked at the feel of small hands pressing down on his shoulders, keeping him from leaving the bed. He turned over his shoulder as much as he could while seated to see Doris awake and upright, as bare as himself. Hiccup was not ashamed to admit that he took a moment to admire her figure, admire the confidence and lack of modesty that, little by little, she brought out in him.

Then he frowned. Normally she didn't wake before he left, and he would always return from his fly to see his bed made and her presence completely erased. The last time they were both awake in the morning she insisted on going again.

He cast a nervous glance at the dragon, wondering how he would mediate between his desires.

As if to answer his unvoiced question Toothless flatly stated, ::No. We are going now::

No female would get in the way of their flying time.

Hiccup nodded, in complete agreement. He turned his head slightly back, only enough to show her his profile.

"Doris, Toothless and I—"

"Μείνε," she repeated, gripping his shoulders in a clear statement that she wanted him to stay put. For a moment, Hiccup did exactly that, looking helplessly at the dragon who, unsurprisingly, provided no help at all. Toothless claimed to have seen several human female breasts in his lifetime, but the dragon still seemed to stare at Doris' every time they were exposed in his wake-up calls.

"Hey," Hiccup said, wanting to direct his friend's attention back to a more appropriate subject.

Then he felt something running along his scalp, and he realized Doris had begun combing her fingers through his hair.

::Social grooming:: Toothless remarked, observing the pair with partial objectivity. ::How thoughtful. I didn't know humans did that::

Hiccup could do nothing but purse his lips and wince at every snarl Doris encountered. He listened
to her tut under her breath as she ran slender finger through his mane over and over again, the tugs becoming less and less frequent.

Hiccup knew his hair took quite the beating, with flying shouldering the bulk of the blame. He combed it, sure, but he wasn't all that concerned with his appearance when he knew he was just going to get dirty in the forge or windswept in the air.

He didn't know why Doris felt the need to be up at this ungodly hour simply to comb his hair for him. But it felt rather nice, especially after the knots loosened. He rather liked this—waking up next to someone and having her groom him.

Maybe, in another life, this would be the treatment he'd receive from a wife. But, in just a few moments, he would be reminded of why that would only ever be 'another life'. The call of the sky was too powerful for such fanciful pondering.

::We need to leave::

Hiccup had to wonder how Toothless always seemed to know where his line of thoughts lay, and, even more, how he always seemed to know what the dragon meant with his short statements.

"I know," Hiccup murmured. Toothless spoke not of their morning flight, but of their stay in Miklagard. Nothing held them back now but a nearly finished project in the forge. One that would be completed today.

They had to be careful about it, too. He didn't want the empire to take action against them, so Hiccup felt he had to blindside them with his leave—even if that meant leaving in the middle of the night without a single goodbye.

Hiccup could feel his hair pulling back from his temples as Doris gathered it at the back of his head. Small tugs and a light pull didn't help him understand what was happening. Toothless' wide, gummy grin did.

::Oh, I like this!: Toothless declared, eliciting a yipping noise to express his approval to Doris. The woman giggled, leaning back with her work clearly finished. Hiccup gingerly patted his head, feeling a soft, smooth surface of hair pulled flat against his head, and eventually patting his way to his newly acquired ponytail.

He turned, giving Doris a crooked grin. He couldn't believe he hadn't thought of this before.

"Eycharisto," he told her with all the sincerity he felt. She grinned and inclined forward, sliding a hand around his neck to pull his mouth to hers in a slow, lingering kiss. He no longer felt embarrassed about Toothless witnessing such acts, not when the dragon had a whole different set of ideals constituting intimacy.

"Go," she ushered in a breath against his lips, and she flopped back down on the bed with all the carelessness of a child.

Needing no other permission, Hiccup slid out of the bed and began to pull together an outfit. He could feel her eyes on him as he dressed, making him conscious of his actions yet pleased at the smile he found on her face every time he snuck a glance at her, one that could be only described as gratified.

She would be back in the gynaeceum by the time he returned. There was always the chance that she wouldn't visited his chambers for however longer he remained, and Hiccup had to wonder if this could be the last time he saw her: content and carefree, wild-hair curling around the pillow and soft
Two weeks after he first returned to the sky, Hiccup finally finished his new braces. He placed a ruby underneath Demyan's latest work order just after he finished his project, knowing it wouldn't be found until the next morning. Demyan drove him crazy, and he was sure the feelings were mutual, but he was eternally grateful for the use of a forge.

His business conducted, Hiccup was prepared to leave before the sun rose the next morning, and it was just as well.

"Get out of here."

Hiccup, who had been throwing his dagger at the badly beaten burlap sack, spun towards the open door of his room, the frame of which Harald leaned against.

"What?"

Harald pushed himself off of the doorframe, stepping into the room. From the bed, Toothless followed his every movement, the cats curled around his paws and belly doing the same.

"You need to get out of here," the Viking repeated, unaffected by the many eyes pinned on him. He seemed more concerned with eyes and ears outside of the room, glancing over his shoulder as if expecting someone to pop in from the hall.

Toothless whuffed for the man's attention, and then shook his head. No one waited outside.

Harald licked his lips, and nodded.

"I'm leaving," the Viking explained. "And you should too."

Hiccup wrinkled his brow. "Trouble?"

Harald snorted. "You could say that. Council just declared the girls take joint custody of the empire this morning."

Hiccup winced, understanding well enough what that could mean.

"And Zoe's...?"

"Pissed. Theodora'll probably be the best thing for this empire, but the entire make up is too unstable, and asking those two to get along is like asking Vikings and dra—er, Saxons to make nice. Zoe can get out of it if she finds herself someone to play emperor, but..."

"You?"

"Ha," Harald barked cynically. "I'm grabbing Maria first chance I get and getting outta here. I recommend you do the same. Ignoring the Maria part. It won't be safe for you, soon. When political
figures get desperate, no one's safe."

Hiccup lowered his eyes. He thought of Doris, and her counsel member ex-husband.

"Yeah," he agreed, softly. "I was planning on leaving at any time. Probably in a couple days..."

Hiccup didn't want to give Harald an exact date, even if the man willingly provided him with good information. He wouldn't trust anyone within these walls.

"Wish I could do the same. Got too much tying me down here to just up in leave at a moment's notice. Must be nice, having that sort of freedom." The last bit was said reluctantly, as though, until now, Harald refused to admit such a thing to himself.

Hiccup smiled his first, true smile in front of the man.

"You have no idea."

Harald nodded, his eyes unfocused as he gazed around the room, and Hiccup could only guess at what went through the man's head. He waited for the Viking to make the next move, expecting some sort of addendum to the bad news. None came.

After a moment of oppressive silence, Harald turned back to the door.

"Well, I just wanted to give you a heads-up."

"I appreciate it," Hiccup returned, and he was honestly grateful.

Harald said nothing more. No nod or wave or parting words. He strode out of the room with the signature strength and pride Hiccup never saw him without.

Something told Hiccup he would never see that particular Viking again, and so his last memories of Haraldr Harðráði existed in the final flutters of that cape.

::We're waiting a couple days?:

Hiccup chanced a look at the empty doorway and shook his head, not trusting his words to remain private.

::We're leaving tonight?:

He nodded.

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The smallest of his bags were tied to the saddle, his main one slung over his shoulder. Framherja was strapped across his back, his sword at his hip, his new braces fixed to his forearms.

His dark red tunic and leather vest blended well into the night, and atop Toothless' ebony shoulders the shadows would cloak them in invisibility.

All Hiccup had to do was hop onto the saddle, and they would trot out the door and ride into the
night.

But he didn't. Not for a moment, any way. He stood, staring at the bed, biting his lip and looking over the softly breathing form of Doris.

::You could wake her up and say goodbye:: Toothless suggested, eager to leave. ::She can scream her head off—no one's going to stop us::

Hiccup reached a tentative hand towards her. He felt like he should at least leave a note, touch her shoulder, kiss her cheek—grant her some kind of gratitude for showing him affection in its most intimate form.

"No," he mumbled, stepping back.

::You sure??::

"Yeah..."

Of course he wasn't sure. He didn't know how to say goodbye to someone like her, not when he didn't even understand the dynamic of their relationship.

He shook his head, turning away from the bed with a determination he didn't think he'd need for such a simple action.

"I'll be nothing more than a memory, soon enough," Hiccup mumbled, and he leapt onto the saddle.

Nothing stopped them from racing down the palace halls; nothing stopped them as they rose higher and higher into the air. The great and fabled walls of Miklagard grew smaller and smaller until Hiccup could hardly differentiate them from the coast, and still nothing impeded them. Perfect winds, clear skies, and the first sparks of daylight highlighting his left cheek.

::We're out:: Toothless stated. His tone sounded disbelieving, as if the situation hadn't fully hit him yet.

"Yeah," Hiccup breathed, sharing the exact sentiments. They were out. Miklagard was behind them. Just like that—not only were they flying, but it was just them again.

Wasn't there a time when he thought he would never have this again? A time of hate and regret and such hopelessness he often thought death were the more merciful fate.

And yet, here they were. They were doing it—moving on. It was really happening.

A smile worked its way onto Hiccup's face, growing as he thought over and over again: they were out.

And, just as he worked himself into a joy, Doris flashed to the forefront of his mind—that moment where she lay on his bed, bare and smiling and happy. For the first time among all his theories pertaining to Doris' interest in him, Hiccup realized that maybe—maybe—he was an escape. A choice of hers rather than a client. Maybe he really did make her happy.

His stomach plummeted at the thought, but it was too late to turn back, too late to give her a proper farewell. It was another choice of his, and he would live with it.

"I'm sorry," he whispered to the wind, and he prayed to the gods who so loved to torment him that she would hear it.
::We're heading back now, aren't we?: Toothless asked, somehow knowing not to comment on Hiccup's apology. ::Back north?:

Hiccup narrowed his eyes against the cutting air, where he could just make out the small mounds of distant Hungarian mountains.

"Back to the demon, yes."

*Back to Berk.*

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**Chapter End Notes**

Please let me know how you felt about this chapter! Anyone going to miss Demyan? Was Hiccup's departure insensitive or justified? And did anyone else notice how weird it is that I put a rug merchant next to a forge? XD
Burdened

Chapter Summary

Toothless confides in Hiccup. Framherja is tested. Berk aims for a sense of normalcy in a worsening war.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Burdened

The ease in which he and Toothless fell back into their old routine was astounding. Hiccup's waking schedule shifted within a week of their departure; they rose to the skies when dark sapphire crept up from the horizons, and settled just before dawn, with Hiccup burrowing underneath Toothless' wing to seek shelter from the sun. He went back to bathing in lakes. He hunted with Toothless, relying on his dagger once more. He left behind his sparring partners, and seating, and hot, easy meals, and felt little want for any of them.

It was as if Miklagard had never happened.

Except, it had. It left its mark on him, and not just physically. He wore his hair in the ponytail all the time now, and he used Doris' hair tie—her memento to him where he had given her none but memories. The guilt of his abrupt departure subsided, but the regret would linger in the recesses of his heart for time to come. He stopped sighing so much every time he looked at the tie after Toothless began beating him with his tail.

Hiccup carried Framherja around, comfortable with the weight but still ignorant in her operation. He didn't have access to a healer, and, even with the scale-braces, he was reluctant to cause himself injury. There had to have been an element he missed, maybe a hint Gudrid dropped in her explanation that he overlooked.

He sustained a renewed hunger for a forge. The excitement of discovering the brown fire, the use of dragon scales in smithing, was only rivaled by the cruelty that he found such a use at the end of his stay. He often dreamed of the weapons, the tools he could create, the armor, if he only had the means to do so. He dreamed of a future where dragons and humans could work together in harmony, and he wouldn't have to sneak around to explore such a fantastical element.

Above all, experiencing Miklagard boosted the young man's confidence regarding possible, and inevitable, encounters with Vikings.

They were heading back to Berk, back to the demon, and Hiccup believed, on some level, that he was ready to face this. Granted, he didn't know much about the demon other than what Toothless told him, but he felt he could at least face his father again. Perhaps at a safe distance. Preferably with Framherja working, which was another issue entirely.

It wasn't just his stint in the city that impacted him. Hiccup's life had turned into a whirlwind of emotions and inspirations as a dragon companion and a new lifestyle influenced him without him ever realizing; leaving Berk had been like yanking the bearskin from beneath his feet. This was not
the mundane island life where his imagination had to keep him entertained in a solitary existence. It was survival and quick decisiveness that drove him now. Not just in the wilderness—as, after certain life choices, no place was home—but everywhere. Survival mattered everywhere. Priorities shifted, his eyes opened, and Hiccup discovered that an unplanned dive, or escaping from bandits, or encountering creatures only told in stories would bring him the same rush as perfecting a weeklong project. He had these opportunities at the tip of his fingers, each one just a few heel-flicks away from reality.

Toothless always wanted to move, and so did he. He roamed, he experienced, and he loved it. He was comfortable with this life; his confidence that this was how he wanted to live grew with every sunset into liberty. He could return to Berk and not feel trapped because he knew, with Toothless at his side, he would always have an escape.

He was ready, yes.

But Toothless...Toothless was another story. An untold story that he could no longer tolerate, because, despite all the progress and strength he'd gained for leaving his village, Hiccup was still scared. And he felt alone because he was the only one bearing his fears.

"Toothless..."

With low winds and an easy speed, he didn't have to battle any force for audibility. Toothless warbled from the base of his throat to affirm his attention.

"We're going to face this demon thing."

::Yeah::

Hiccup bit his lip. "Can you...I don't know...have you told me everything? I feel like we're heading there unprepared. I only know it can control minds, and that it's growing, and that it needs to be fed. I've never even seen it."

::She's...not small::

"Toothless..."

Hiccup could feel the dragon shift beneath him, moving into a posture of defeat.

::I don't know what more I can say to prepare you:: he sighed.

"Yeah, I figured we'd need to do a little infiltration," Hiccup admitted, and he sensed tension draw between Toothless' shoulders. "Erm...are you...okay with that?"

How else would he gather enough information to figure out how to kill this thing? Sneaking around was their specialty; it was how they bested robbers and pirates. It was how they acquired half their valuables.

Granted, they only used it against humans thus far.

::Of course...we'll need a...a very good plan::

Hiccup could sense the dishonesty in Toothless' agreement, as if the dragon felt such great reluctance in returning to the nest that, given the choice, he would never do so.

"Toothless?"
"We've pretty much done what I've wanted to do..." Hiccup's statement headed in an obvious direction, and the dragon had no choice but to react with a more forthright response.

::And I like what you want to do. Most of the time:::

"Why haven't you asked to find your drove?" Hiccup asked, abrupt. He'd wondered and wondered this, never really acknowledging the thought as he knew Toothless would make his opinion known if he really didn't like what they were doing. But he reached the point where curiosity would not be stayed. "We could have gone north right from the beginning and—"

::No:: Toothless cut him off, finality ringing in Hiccup's ears.

"But—"

::We don't need to find them. You said when we first left the island that you would have an easier time surviving in warmer climates. That was more important to me:::

"Yeah, I forgot to account for more humans," Hiccup denounced wryly. "I understand...I mean, I appreciate how, how accepting you've been about everything... But there's still so much I don't understand. Do dragons not have a need for-for... community?"

Toothless never once said he missed his home. Not once, in their months—years, at this point—of being together, did he speak of his home or memories or family members other than informational handouts. And it seemed far too callous for a being who nuzzled, and licked, and cared for Hiccup so freely.

::No, we very much like the company of our own kind::: Toothless defended, but it lacked a certain verve when spoken in that chary manner. On some subconscious level Toothless knew he had no right to act offended.

"Then what is going on?" Hiccup continued to press because he was not going to land this dragon until he got some answers. He was tired of being the only one who opened up. "Do you not miss your family?"

::What does it matter::: Toothless mumbled.

"It matters to me! I don't like to think you're someone who can forget people he cares about so easily!"

Hiccup had pined for his island life back in the genesis of their adventure, and he wasn't quiet about it all the time, either. He missed Gobber and he missed his father. He missed the way the twins' faces started to light up when they saw him, he missed the way Fishlegs felt more and more comfortable dishing out facts to him—or being seen doing so. He missed the respect Snotlout began to show him—he missed out on what it may have amounted to. These could have been his friends had he played things differently.

Thing's didn't play differently, and, for a long time, he had to remind himself of this. By now, he was glad they didn't. He couldn't imagine ever missing out on what he experienced with Toothless.

::I've never forgotten!:: Toothless growled, finally showing something other than hesitation. ::Do you think I would forget about you? Have you forgotten what I am doing for you?::

"Of course, I haven't," Hiccup stated softly, and his hand brushed against the neck scales blending
into the night. "I'm just trying to understand what your home life was like. Why you don't seem to care..."

Toothless would not be bated.

::And I don't know why you care. It's the past. I've moved on, there's no need to look back::

"Do you not trust me?" Hiccup asked, refusing to let up as he had done so many times in the past.

::I trust you::

"Then why don't you trust me with your problems?"

Toothless didn't respond.

For a long while they flew in silence, and Hiccup had given up hope that he would ever find an answer. He felt comfortable enough confiding in Toothless about his insecurities. The dragon knew more about Hiccup than anyone on Berk ever cared to know. Not even Gobber, with all his rare tolerance for Hiccup's eccentricities, would listen to half of his excuses and ideas—nothing that deviated too far from the "Viking way"—often stating that Hiccup's "way" made "grown men uncomfortable".

But Toothless listened. Toothless gave him input and insights; Toothless helped him understand himself, helped him release his frustrations and build his confidence, and accept the man he realized he was meant to be. He acted as Hiccup's personal curative.

And now Toothless was hurting; something inside of the dragon was distressed and the further north they traveled, the more obvious it became. Hiccup wanted to help the dragon as the dragon had helped him, but he couldn't unless Toothless talked to him.

The brooding youth suspected that there was some aspect of this bonding that allowed them to catch mental cues from one another, because Toothless finally spoke.

::I'm not going back until I regain my pride::

Hiccup sat back in the saddle, not sure if the rushing winds garbled the words or not.

"What?"

::I'm disgraced:: Toothless rephrased, monotone. ::I can't return::

Hiccup blinked slowly, wetting his lips as he rolled the offbeat excuse around in his mind.

"Disgraced? What...you can't be...I mean, they kicked you out?" Perposterous! "Why would they kick you out? Because you got captured?"

::It never should have happened. If I had been stronger—::

"Stronger!" Hiccup could feel indignation well inside of him. He didn't know if Toothless was exaggerating, being excessively prideful, or if this were really a practice of dragons, but the anger rising in his chest, filling this throat with words of revulsion, would not be checked. "This was mind control we're talking about! You even refer to it as a demon! This thing sounds like it isn't even a part of this world! How could anyone—anyone—expect you to—?"

Hiccup couldn't find the words to finish his sentence, too heated, too confused. Such an unexpected and irrational justification left him short of breath. And Toothless! For once the dragon showed no
pride, no outrage on his own behalf. He spoke as a defeated man would—he believed he was defeated, he accepted defeat. Hiccup would hardly recognize the Night Fury as his own for the uncharacteristic belittlement weighing his words. Had this been lurking beneath the shining surface of those scales this whole time? This ugly, out-of-place shame tainting his best friend?

::A dragon should only be bested in battle, and only against a dragon greater than himself. A dragon should never serve another, certainly not by relying on humans for food. I can't ever show my face to my clan, not while I'm tainted by this… and for an imprisonment that lasted so long.::

The game was up. Hiccup had cracked the shell of an ice casing and every haunting of Toothless' mind slipped from the dragon's weakening hold. Maybe it was their approach to the North, or maybe Toothless had reached a point where he felt safe enough to reveal this furtive diffidence. Maybe, this whole time, Hiccup only had to push and push Toothless until his resolve to shield him from the truth broke.

"You're the only one who escaped from her!" Hiccup felt he had to point out because such an explanation for avoiding a family pained him. "That has to count for something, doesn't it?"

::Saved by a human, crippled in the process:::

Hiccup jerked his hand from rubbing Toothless' sleek neck, so fast the scales might as well have been molten.

::I didn't say that to hurt you::: Toothless quickly amended. ::But that is how they would view it. That's how I would have viewed it, had I not bonded with you. You know I wouldn't change anything that happened:::

"I know," Hiccup sighed, but hearing Toothless shared his sentiments always helped.

::I left::: Toothless went on, willingly, perhaps finding it useless to continue to hold this in. ::I had gone where I shouldn't have gone, and I...:: The dragon heaved a sigh, calming himself into a resolution. ::Defeating her. That would restore my pride:::

"You're still afraid," Hiccup observed, and Toothless had to wonder how his human could pick up his weakest, most shameful emotions so quickly. "Is she really so terrifying?"

::It's not her size that scares me::: Toothless hushed, and his mind brought him back to those days—not the ones under her control, but the ones right after, trapped and lame. When his mind cleared and he realized what had happened and how broken he felt, knowing he had been used, knowing the impossibility of ever living, or dying, without that humiliation bound to his soul. ::I just...I don't want to fall into that control again. I couldn't bear it if I were to ever feel that powerless again:::

He found something, a hope, when he found the human willing to look beyond his scales and teeth. He found a chance for redemption and life and, later on, love. He loved his human for saving him in every sense of the word. And he wanted to protect his human.

::She took my free will:::

He wanted to protect his human from himself.

Hiccup continued to chew on his lip, churning decisions around in his mind along with a guilt and despair that could have been his own or Toothless'. He'd always figured Toothless was the stronger of the two—mentally and physically—and he had worked to equate himself to the dragon's prowess and confidence. Hiccup always viewed himself as the insecure one in their pair, the one seeking
assurance and support. He never believed *he'd* have the certainty and stability to uphold Toothless in a moment of weakness.

And therein lay the problem. He never imagined Toothless *having* moments of weakness to begin with. But Hiccup had asked for this, he pushed for this, and he would accept accountability. He swore to himself that he would encourage his dragon with all the support Toothless willed to him.

"Toothless, we don't have to go back. We can travel the world for as long as we need to—"

::*We do!*: the dragon strongly broke in. ::We're the only ones that know what's going on, *I'm* the only one who's escaped her, *you're* the only one who can understand me. We're going to be the ones who end this terror, and it won't be because of my pride or your guilt. It will be because... because somewhere, deep within us, we've got a... a conscience!:*

It was impossible to tell if the dragon chose to do this for Hiccup or himself, but, apparently, it would happen nonetheless.

Hiccup smiled, sad and considerate of Toothless' determination to press forward.

"Those damn consciences."

::*Besides:* Toothless continued, refusing to allow his mind to linger in anguish, ::*you'll never be happy if we leave the humans to their fate*::

"This isn't about just my happiness," Hiccup pointed out. He felt sapped with the burden this conversation brought with it. He sensed a new responsibility in the confession, a new reason to defeat this demon. Before he battled within himself about his exceptional position in this war and how much he actually *owed* to the village. He escaped and he had his freedom and sometimes, when he entertained the idea of returning to Berk and only felt dread settle in his belly, he wondered if he really *had* to do it. They survived and thrived in this war for centuries before he existed. How badly did they truly need him?

But bringing Toothless into this, banking on the fate of such a strongly hailed virtue—that made this suicide mission more than a duty. This was now an obligation. He may not have owed Berk much, but Hiccup owed Toothless his very last breath.

::*I shouldn't be worried about losing my mind, either:* Toothless added as an afterthought.::*That's probably what annoys me the most, because I know I'm worrying needlessly, and this fear of losing my mind has no business residing in my body*::

"Why?"

::*Because, the vördr said...well, she said you would protect us*::

*The vördr?* Hiccup's brow creased in thought.

"Gudrid? When did—?"

Oh yes, after the axe incident.

And then he actually *thought* about what Toothless just said.

"Wait...*I'm* going to protect us?" He wanted to scoff. A poignant, and warm part of his mind identified how Gudrid would roll her eyes at his typical cynicism were she present.
"I think... I think there's something about the human mind that makes it uncontrollable. Maybe it's this 'imaginations' you have. It was something we talked about earlier, remember? About how humans cannot find the demon's nest because the only trail to her is through her outputs...::

"Yes," Hiccup mumbled, "Oh yes..."

Toothless knew from the familiar, and hardly audible, way he trailed his words that the boy fell deep into thought, no doubt concocting plans to use this theory to their advantage.

::I do trust you:: Toothless affirmed from their earlier argument, even if Hiccup no longer listened with both, rounded ears.

He trusted Hiccup to guide them with his foot even without deliberate thought, just as he trusted Hiccup enough to expose his fears. Just as he trusted Hiccup enough to protect them when the time came for it.

And, with this realization, Toothless felt a small weight lift from his wings.

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His feet burrowed into a thin coating of scorched earth and shredded bark, every step releasing a dull crunch to stab at his "damn conscience". Bare-limbed trees, shelled in death, stretched so far in every direction that greenery was but a memory.

And that's what this was—memory. This wasn't even death, as death had passed months ago. This was beyond death, and the only thing beyond death was the bare wisps of remembrance.

White remains stuck out against the dark setting; human remains, bones and hollow bodies, scavenged to the last fiber of their nutrient. They could have been people Hiccup knew, shared meals with, and he made a point of ignoring those exposed graves because he knew, given the chance, his mind would run away will all sorts of identities for them.

Arrowheads and splintered shoots, rusted swords and headless fokos, fractured weapons of every kind littered an equally fractured forest. A battle had taken place here, yes, but Hiccup focused more on the obvious signs of fire that spread throughout the forest, wracking his brain for memories that seemed a lifetime ago. Hadn't he set the fire?

"Did I do this...?" he mumbled, squinting against the dry air. They arrived in Hungary late afternoon, giving them plenty of light to behold the welcoming landmark. His profound disappointment in not seeing Domokos or the other Magyars was overruled only by his concern over their fate. The absolute lifelessness that hung in the very air chilled him even under the Einmánuður sun.

::I did this:: Toothless corrected ::You can't breath fire::

Hiccup rubbed his forehead, scrunching his eyes shut. "Right, right..."

He had shot that Magyar who tried to sneak up on Solt. Had that been his first kill? No no... it was just the shoulder. But the man was pinned so... maybe a first indirect kill...

It was his first successful battle attack on a human, if a bit unfair. It felt vacant now. Like the opportunity to feel pride or guilt had long passed. Another blank-faced memory.
It was *afterwards* that Toothless had shot his firebolts—with Hiccup's support and consent. The aim was to keep the Nyék's enemies from advancing but...

He turned to the fallen stable, marked like its surroundings with fire and terror, where Toothless nosed about, probably mourning the absence of the horses that never quite trusted him.

*Of course* the fires would have spread, it was a forest, and it was a dry season. The Magyars, with all their arrow-oriented tactics, probably used it to alight their arrows. Spreading it farther, wider.

Hiccup sighed, noting that there weren't nearly enough remains to be an entire clan, and knowing that, with most of their supplies cleared away, the move was—*hopefully*—a willing one.

"Looks like they survived, anyway," he continued to observe. His initial horror had died some when logic set in. Many of the broken weapons had designs that did not match those most commonly used in the Nyék—enemy weapons. Disarmed enemies pointed to a more likely defeat at their end.

Hiccup bent down to pick up a bow, the grip shredded, a fissure running along the belly.

"Maybe it was a different battle," he called across the clearing. He tossed the bow aside once he realized it was beyond repair and continued his slow circling, extinction cracking under his feet as he walked around the blackened site. He remembered practicing archery here, and learning Hungarian words that he was certain were swears.

::I can't catch their scent anywhere:: he heard back from within the stable. ::They probably left not long after we did::.

"They were nomads," Hiccup added, trying to make himself feel better as he stared, unseeing, at another damaged bow. This one was so burnt he couldn't figure if this belonged to the Nyék or their enemy. "They moved all the time."

Like Toothless, he belatedly realized. But the Nyék stuck together; they were a family. Toothless left one family for another...

Hiccup released a breath, feeling stifled with the oppressing atmosphere.

"Think there's any game around here? Or should we head to—"

A screeching roar stabbed at Hiccup's ears, startling his question into ruin. He was still trying to pinpoint where the inhuman bellow originated, and what created it, when a dragon landed directly between him and the stables, so harshly it sent up a burst of dust and ash. Hiccup inhaled sharply.

Where had it come from? And how had it appeared, unseen, in these leveled lands?

It must have shot from the sky faster than Hiccup could react, faster than Toothless could sense, and now his dragon could not reach him. Neither him nor the skies.

Hiccup did not dwell on that obvious handicap for long when he found his study drawn to the bulging, bloodshot eyes of the beast, and all thoughts of attempting to conciliate with the reptile fled his mind. This dragon was angry, if its aggressive entrance was anything to go by.

::*Hiccup!*::

Hiccup backpedaled from the dragon, taking advantaged of its distraction to Toothless' terrified roar to try and identify its breed.

It bore the dark red scales of a Nightmare, and the long, lanky body as well. But this dragon had a
horn on its nose, and two side-fins, shaped and sized as those of a shark's back, protruded from its cheekbones. Antenna flowed from the back of its head; lissome and stretching back half the length of its body.

It crawled on four legs; it's belly brushing along the ashes. Leaf-shaped spikes aligned down the ridge of its back and thin, veined wings that looked like they would barely lift its own bodyweight extended and retracted in a threatening posture.

Recognition stirred; Hiccup had seen this dragon before, somewhere. But where?

Toothless roared at the beast, and the human could tell it wasn't the placating type of roar. The new dragon's body language read agitated in every sense of the word. Its claws hardly touched the ground for any length of time as it shifted its weight—antennae swaying, tail swishing, lip curling, and nostrils flaring.

Toothless met Hiccup eyes from across the clearing and Hiccup understood the unspoken message. This was not a friendly dragon. This was not a neutral dragon, like the white dragon.

"Can...can you talk to it?" Hiccup asked, his voice wavering between volumes that would reach Toothless while hoping not to attract the notice of the red dragon. A futile effort. The dragon whipped its head back in a harsh motion and its pupils, if possible, thinned more as the livid gaze zeroed in on the human.

Toothless roared and swiped a claw at it—too far to actually make contact, but Hiccup figured it was more of an attention grabbing gesture than a potential attack. It worked; the dragon turned back to Toothless and hissed, an extended, skinny, forked tongue waving out of its mouth with the vibrations of the noise.

"Can you tell it to calm down?" Hiccup risked again, backing up to the edges of the clearing with faltering steps.

Toothless' nostrils flared.

::Unfortunately, no. This male is so far into his yen he cannot be reasoned with. He's probably desperate to make it to primary, and needs the approval of a female:: When Hiccup gave no sign of recognition, Toothless rumbled ::Human sports of glory, and the wars that riddle this land, have most likely depleted any decent oblation. A human-dragon pair is probably the most interesting find for wingspans::

No.

"You mean...?"

::Congratulations, we've been chosen as oblation::

"He wants to give our skulls to some lady dragon?" Hiccup hissed louder than he intended. Whipping around for a second time, the restive dragon rattled its tongue at him.

::Hey! Right here!:: Toothless snapped, regaining its attention again.

Hiccup winced and whispered, "Should I be flattered or...?"

::You should be concerned::

"Right," he breathed, just in time to listen to another earsplitting roar. The dragon sounded like it was
in pain. Apprehension aside, Hiccup started to feel the first tendrils of concern for it.

He took another step back, his brain working furiously to pinpoint where he had seen it and if he knew of any obvious weaknesses. His hand itched for a weapon, but he didn't want to startle it into an attack. It didn't sound like it could be reasoned with, but maybe, maybe, both parties could get out of this unscathed.

His next step broke a frail twig, hidden beneath crunched leaves, and the resounding crack echoed unhindered without foliage to muffle it.

The dragon twisted around faster than Hiccup could have anticipated and its jaws stretched, a green glow budding in the back of its throat.

Had Toothless not jumped on its back in the next moment, cutting the power-up short, Hiccup would have been a victim of a much more direct, and potent, attack.

A thin stream of white-green liquid still released and headed straight for Hiccup's face. He brought his arms up, instinctively. He could feel the pressure against his arm guards, even when misdirected; the hard jet knocked him back.

The dragon armor held, liquid dribbling off like water. But Hiccup knew this wasn't water. Hiccup knew because he wasn't quite fast enough, his arms not quite thick enough, and the liquid splashed the side of his neck.

He couldn't stop the anguished cry that escaped from a prison of clenched teeth. He could feel it bite into his flesh like a thousand, tiny fire ants, burning a trail in the drip that rolled down the protruding bone to the very edges of his collar.

::HICCUP!::

Toothless' increasing the ferocity of his attack, all teeth and claws and fury, barely registered in Hiccup's awareness. He tried to shrug his clothed shoulder against the burning region, unwilling to allow any more to come into contact with his skin. It was just a splash, he'd be fine. He'd suffered burns before. He'd be fine.

He tried not to think how deep this liquid corroded his flesh, or if the wetness he felt amidst the burning was blood or acid.

Acid.

The name came to him.

"Changewing!" he gasped. The dragon that spits acid. Extremely dangerous. Kill on sight.

And as this realization came to mind the Changewing opened its jaws before Toothless—launching acid directly at the dragon on top of him. Toothless reacted a second before it happened, his wings reaching up to form a shield.

Hiccup watched in horror, unable to move, as the steaming, jade liquid slapped against the dark cocoon, bouncing off in a dazzling, pale spray. The defense held—this time.

Hiccup didn't know how many hits like that Toothless' wings could take, and the dragon certainly couldn't fight with such a blinding form of protection. He didn't know the shot limit of a Changewing. He didn't know so much other than this was not something to be fought at close range and—damn the gods themselves!—why did they always encounter problems like this when they
were separated? Why weren't they ever challenged, openly, while in the air, when they were indomitable?

Because that would be too much fortune to ask for.

He shrugged Framherja from around his back, blocking out the pain in his neck with astounding ease as Toothless' grounded disadvantage became more and more prominent.

Hiccup frantically searched the ground for anything he could fire at the dragon, some left over arrows, anything remotely projectile shaped.

Now would be a great time for his bow to work. His hand tightened around Framherja's grip and he felt such resentment towards this bow, towards Thor, that he didn't care if it damned him for eternity because he was still useless in this moment.

He flicked his eyes from the ground to check on the clashing dragons and immediately noticed Toothless limping—Oh gods, his foot!

Toothless may have stepped in puddle acid that hadn't been absorbed by the ground, or he may have taken a hit to the leg, but he was favoring his front, right paw too much and Hiccup knew for a fact that the pads of his feet were one of the few areas of the Night Fury's body that bore no scales.

Hiccup had half a mind to run in there with his sword but knew that would immediately demote him to hindrance, soon followed by dead. Toothless didn't need to be on the offense and defense.

Damn it! It was futile. Framherja wouldn't accept anything less than the best from what he could tell. Certainly not some broken remains scrounged from a battlefield, months old. He could throw his dagger but a dagger throw had too much lag time compared to an arrow, and the chances of accidentally hitting Toothless were too high for him to risk. The chances of simply pissing off the yen-trapped dragon were even higher.

His eyes went from the bow, to the fight, and back to the bow. Helplessness and hatred welled within him. A terrible crush of desperation followed, and then aggression and tension until a powerful jitter bloomed from within that. He clenched his eyes shut, not knowing if he could stomach watching Toothless battle while he stood there, incapable, one hand clenching Framherja's grip, the other pinching the string.

He wanted to fire, he wanted to help. He needed to do something, anything—this was too much, far too much for his heart to handle. The pressure was too much, the power choking, and it would continue to choke him because he had no outlet, no way to help—

What was the point of this stupid bow? He couldn't even use it!

She is yours to wield.

Gudrid told him he'd learn in his own time but he was out of time.

Daughter to Mjöllnir...

She was special, yes—anyone who looked at her golden hide and felt the life humming within that metal shell would know this—and she was gifted to him—but the only good she could do was warm his hand as he watched his best friend burn under the fire of acid.

Hiccup felt like his chest would explode with the mounting negativity. His eyes were still closed, Framherja grew hotter in his hand and some damned, misplaced thrill had the muscles in his stomach
pulsing.

*It will be your duty to learn her power...to bring her to her full potential...*

What was he lacking? Why could he not find anything, *anything—*

...*and to let her bring you to yours...*

—to please her?

The chaos that stung and stirred and stressed and squeezed just beneath his sternum mounted to the point where even the air around him felt static.

...*borne from a spark of its strike...yours to wield...*

...*yours to wield...*

And suddenly it became clear to Hiccup. His eyes opened to find his arms had aimed the bow and pulled the string taut, his chest a jumble of emotion but his mind clear as the oddest question posed to mind.

Why would Thor give him one half of a weapon?

*It has already been decided.*

He *didn’t.*

*You are the man who will wield Framherja.*

Thor had given him the *other* half.

He released the string, feeling the energy building up in his chest evaporate with an almost draining effect, and his eyes just caught the streak of light bolting through the sky, striking the Changewing in an extended wing while it reared in mid-roar.

It screamed—not like it screamed before with the promise of attack—but a scream of absolute agony as the majority of its wing blew off in an explosion of energy.

Only absolute stupefaction numbed the guilt and horror Hiccup should have felt. Even Toothless, who still limped badly, had to take a moment to regain his senses.

::*What in Lahmu's mud-riddled hair, was that?::* The dragon gasped. One moment he battled against a dragon out of its mind, and a flash of light later he no longer felt the pressure of claws and burning against his weary wings. He felt a different sort of heat, one that left an empty chill with its quick evaporation.

Hiccup, still dumb with shock, lifted the limply held bow. He struggled to find the words to explain, when the Changewing hunched over and began hissing in the most disturbing manner—grating and loud and hair-raising. The pikes of its ridge rattled as it lobbed its neck and flattened itself to the ground.

Its scales started to shift, darker and darker, taking on the patterns of the earth until it was only the bleeding, blackened mass of it's back and the crunching below its weight that pinpointed its location.

A scream—raw with pain and anger—tore through the long, camouflaged throat, followed by an aimless, wide arc of acid.
Toothless leapt to where its back might be before it could get around to hitting Hiccup, and as his
dragon sprang into action, so did the boy. Hiccup drew the golden string again, more confident but
still fearful of failing to discharge. It could have been a fluke, a one-time thing; he may have
misunderstood something...

But then he wouldn't be feeling that same, electrifying sensation soar beneath his breast. Hiccup paid
more attention to the build of this perception, took note of the heat that collected between his tensed
and occupied hands. The Changewing continued to thrash—shifting in and out of visibility, blood
flying from its ruined wing—trying to shake off the Night Fury that bit into its neck, and, arching its
back, momentarily exposed its stomach.

That was it.

Hiccup released the string, felt the heat dissipate, felt the indescribable energy he mustered drain from
him as fast as the bolt left his bow. The energy—lightning, he suspected—crackling white and blue,
almost moved too fast for his eyes to follow.

He managed to catch the sort of flash one would see between storm clouds before the soft side of the
Changewing's belly exploded, all warm blood and hissing acid that colored the once monochrome
setting. The dragon collapsed, boneless, natural scale color returning, and Toothless sprang away
from its back much as he had with the wing string before.

Hiccup's knees felt weak and he didn't know if it were because of how inexplicably taxed firing left
him, or because his stomach rolled at the pinkish-grey entrails roping across the grounds. He
breathed far too heavily, and he had not even been the one doing the real fighting.

He gave the gruesome sight a grim look and turned away. He wouldn't torture himself with scenarios
where they all would have gotten away unharmed—the time for that had passed the moment he saw
Toothless injured. This dragon died by his hand, his first dragon kill. Another death in an old
graveyard.

He sniffed, and swallowed, and began to slowly walk to his piled belongings where Toothless
already waited. He recalled the limp.

"Are you okay?" he asked the Night Fury, who took one look at Hiccup and gave the Changewing's
body a snarl of deep vexation.

::Yes:: Toothless immediately responded. ::You?:

"Sure," Hiccup said and as he spoke that, as the last of his distractions fled him, the burning in his
neck renewed.

::Your neck...:: Toothless pointed out.

"Your leg," he countered, and they both knew better than to push the other to admit their pain.

"We need to clean these," Hiccup sighed. He really, desperately wanted to touch his neck—to rub a
hand on it, at least, soothe it, somehow—but that could result in even more pain. His cuffs still had
the acid on them so he had to be careful with removing those. He knew nothing about this acid, its
potency, or its shelf life.

::We need to get out of here:: Toothless snorted, and he positioned himself for Hiccup to hop on the
saddle.

Hiccup took the cue, snatching his bag and giving the skies a quick, nervous glance. "More?"
"Bound to be. Where there is one, there are sure to be others, especially if he was in his season::

Was.

Hiccup gently touched the bowstring pressed into his chest.

"Right. Let's get to the Duna and get out of here." He stared down at Framherja, a soft smile on his lips. He had done it. It was enlivening, so much so that he felt strangely stupefied by it.

That also could have been the enigmatic exhaustion that seemed to have overcome his bones.

::You figured it out:: Toothless pointed out by way of congratulation. ::It only took...what? Two seasons? And us being attacked:: The dragon's tone softened as he regarded the damage Hiccup managed to inflict on the Changewing. ::How did you do it? That was...that was power from the sky::

"It was a familiar feeling before I fired," Hiccup explained as he began to shoulder his bag. The burn was subsiding—that or he was getting used to it. "I think I've felt that before when I held her but...I don't know, I hadn't really paid attention. I just thought it was excitement—oh, I'm not too heavy for your leg, am I?" Hiccup had only asked after he climbed atop the saddle.

::You're fine:: Toothless assured him.

"What about your wings?"

As if miffed Hiccup even questioned the durability of his beloved wings, Toothless spread them wide and shot to the sky with powerful drives.

"Okay!" Hiccup exclaimed, and he set to directing them towards the nearest water source.

The winds turned his neck into fire, and he bit the inside of his cheek to keep from making any noise. His mind was merciful to him in that short flight to the river, for in that moment the memories of two conversations suddenly connected. It brought about a most intriguing distraction.

"Toothless...you were in your yen when you were captured, weren't you?"

::How do you figure?: The tone was too light to be taken in the negative, so the human took it as confirmation.

"You were looking for oblation, weren't you?" Hiccup pressed, pouncing on the audible foible.

"You were trying to get that prime thing!"

::It's primary:: Toothless grumbled, like he had lost some grand game, but Hiccup knew it meant more to him than that. Toothless' pride would not bring himself to admit out loud that, not only did he fail to gain acceptance from his chosen female, but he lost his freedom in the process.

::My closest nest mate and I both had our sights on the same female:: Toothless began, finally ready to bear the last of his insecurities to his human companion. ::We contested over everything in our lives, from who could make the sharpest turns to who could fit the most fish in our mouth. We even argued on who could extract their teeth the fastest::

"He was your best friend," Hiccup realized.

::Yes. Rivals and best friends, so it was only natural that we would choose the same female when we hit our yen as she reached her heat. He was a better hunter, I'll admit. But I was the better flyer.
was faster, and I knew I could slip off to lands untraveled and find the most exotic, fanciful oblation she would have ever seen before we continued our Rove::

"But you never made it back," Hiccup finished for him.

::No:: Toothless sighed. ::I did not. He won that round, I'm sure. But, strangely, I'm okay with it. I don't feel like I've lost::

Hiccup laughed and gave the dragon a good scratch on the side of his neck. He could ignore the pain in his own because his dragon trusted him, and his dragon would let him bear some of his burdens from now on.

The river came into view and they descended towards its cool relief.

"Toothless, you won't ever have to compete with me for a woman," Hiccup solemnly promised.

::Oh good. I was worried:: And Toothless sounded honestly relieved. ::I don't know how I'd ever compete against your masculine collection of fur patches::

"...I can set you on fire now."

########

The huntress, bold and sharp, moved through the familiar setting with keen, blue eyes. Her prey came into sight and she honed in on him, every surrounding obstacle and distraction fading away as her mission stole much of her attention. The target, unsuspecting, faced away from her, more interested in fish than a potential demise.

Perfect. The element of surprise would only aid her.

"TUMBLE!" Ruffnut roared, attracting the attention of everyone within earshot. She stormed through the village port with thundering steps for someone of her weight—thudding against the aged dock wood louder than the heaviest Viking Berk bred. A terrifying sight to behold, Ruffnut's braids swung violently and her arms oscillated in a sharp tempo, powering her fast walk. The surrounding men scattered to other docks, giving the woman a clear warpath to the only man that mattered. The man who had much, much explaining to do.

Tumble Trollson shrunk back against the hanging net he worked on, somehow managing to look small despite his large frame.

"Ah, Ruff—Ruffnut—yes." He coughed into his fist and straightened his posture in an attempt to regain his composure. "I was, um, expecting you—"

A fish slapped him in the face, one snatched from a newly stocked basket and thrown by the Thorston girl with deadly aim. She didn't slow in her approach; she kept her determined march until she stood right before him, belly to belly. A sneer spoiled her features as she dragged his head down to her level by the hairs of his chin.

Tumble's beard was not a long one, and the harsh pinch that came with the treatment had the grown man whimpering.

"What," the blonde began with deliberate slowness, "were you thinking?" he opened his mouth,
prepared to give her an explanation, some calming words, anything to soothe her ire and keep his privates unharmed, but she cut him off by shrieking, "Marriage? We're getting married?"

Tumble's face darkened to match the brightest strands of his carmine hair, not only at her public declaration but also at the mutters that rippled above the docks. Even with his head held stationary, he could make out piteous headshakes from his fellow fishermen in the outskirts of his vision.

"Well, with your agreement," Tumble conceded in much softer tones. He daren't pull away from her beard-grip for fear of hurting himself and upsetting her further. "I came to your father—"

"I know! I heard!" Ruffnut interrupted. She gave the short beard another yank. "You want to marry me?"

"Yes!" he yelped with the pain.

The girl shook her head, disbelief overturning the confusion that initially stimulated her indignation.

"Do you even know who I am?"

She was Ruffnut Thorston. She was crazy and everyone knew it. Ruffnut could see the way people would jump anytime she raised her voice or moved too suddenly. She had conditioned such a response over years of crude behavior and senseless stunts. She was unpredictable and unreasonable. No one bothered to argue with her or tell her what to do, she was a woman who no one wanted to try and tame.

There were even rumors that she bathed in sheep's blood every full moon. She started those rumors.

Naturally, Ruffnut knew she would marry someday; she knew she would be arranged into a new status at the whim of her parents. She hadn't the gift or skill to become a priestess—the only other alternative. On the Isle of Berk one, or both, members of a budding couple could make requests regarding their marriage partner—the village's isolation and sovereign ways allowed for such a margin. But Ruffnut possessed no illusions that anyone would request her for their wife.

And then this happened.

"Why?" she hissed. "Why would you ever want to marry me?"

If someone was forced into marrying her, and she forced to marry him, any maltreatment of the partner would be expected. She could beat on them, mistreat them, and no one would be to blame because it could, and would, be viewed as nothing more than an unfortunate match.

But someone asked for her. Someone saw her as something more than just "settling". Someone expected something from her, and someone was going to be disappointed when she didn't measure up.

Ruffnut didn't like disappointing people. She'd rather they expect nothing but the worst from her in the first place.

"I like your hair," Tumble suddenly blurted. It could have been his answer, it could have been a compulsion, but the reason behind Tumble's statement was lost in the absolute blindsiding manner in which it was delivered.

Ruffnut released the facial hair and reeled back, reacting as though he just delivered an insult to her.

"You like...my hair?" Her hand unconsciously went to one, thick braid heavy over her shoulder. She
liked her hair, but it was her hair. Who was he to like her hair?

To the young woman's mortification, she could feel heat rising to her cheeks. She was not blushing. She was not. It was unusually hot out to begin with that day and the sun reflected off the water to make it more so. She had simply spent a little too much time on the docks, that's all.

No man had ever complimented her before—but the didn't mean she was blushing.

"And your voice," he added, seeing he had her off foot. "I like how you move after you deal with a dragon."

Ruffnut, dimly aware that she may have stopped breathing at one point, faintly mumbled, "You… you noticed that?"

She used to slouch her back, hulk between kills as her brother did. She may have done it unconsciously; she wanted the fear and gruesome picture it would paint in the firelight of a raid. It was after her friendship renewed with Astrid that she picked up the hip-swinging thing. It was fun and it made her feel womanly, even amidst all the bloodshed—like a shadow of a different life—but she never thought anyone would look at her when she fought next to Astrid. And certainly not since Astrid's hips came in.

Except for this one man, who happened to ask for her over Berk's Viking prodigy.

Tumble's grin eased from relief to warm as Ruffnut's uncertainty showed plainly. A moment of vulnerability made her look smoother than the loveliest carving of Freyja.

"We all do."

Nearby men who were pretending not to listen busied themselves with the nearest available task. One man jumped back to scrubbing his wife's laundry.

Ruffnut could think of nothing to say. Her mouth worked soundlessly for a moment that seemed just a beat longer than her pride could handle. She came to the docks with a whole list of reasons why marrying her was a bad idea, and she had a whole list of actions to help emphasize this point, but these mental lists had vanished sometime between now and when he smiled at her.

Er, when he mentioned her hair, that is.

"You know I'm crazy right?" She asked this with the sternest expression she could muster amidst such incredulity, but it lacked the temper she once wielded with ease.

Tumble could practically hear the resignation tingeing that question. And resignation often led to acceptance.

"Of course," he said with a casual nod. "You're the only girl worth getting to know."

All her inexperience with compliments was making itself known at this most unfortunate moment. Ruffnut could feel something like a girdle squeeze around her chest in a painfully pleasant way. What an odd feeling. She didn't trust herself not to do something stupid, like blush, so she kept talking.

"I'm not going to suddenly be sane underneath it all," she warned.

He countered with, "I don't expect you to be."
"I'm a terrible cook."

"I'm a terrible hunter."

"I drool in my sleep."

"I snore."

"I hate fish."

"I hate Nadders." And he said this with a nod to the necklace she wore that carried one of the teeth her heavily pregnant mother knocked straight out a dragon's mouth just before she went into labor. The other one went to her brother.

Ruffnut bit her lip, an angry expression building on her face. Tumble didn't know what to expect from her, it was half the appeal and half the apprehension that came with requesting such a wife.

She whipped her hand up and he flinched. For some, unfathomable reason this made Ruffnut smile. She only moved to poke a calloused, slender finger against the rough tunic stretched across his chest.

"You better keep me happy."

That was acceptance if Tumble ever heard it.

"Right," he said with a silly grin.

Ruffnut then drove a fist into his stomach, and his grin puckered out into a moan of pain. Tumble hunched over with the wind driven from him.

"Just a reminder of what you're in for," Ruffnut winked. And she walked off, away from her gasping betrothed and the wide-eyed spectators, with swinging arms and swinging hips.

Astrid watched as Ruffnut left the fishing docks with far more composure than she arrived. Even from the tallest steps of the mead hall, she could make out the barest hint of a smile gracing her friend's face. It had been an amusing sight to behold, seeing the young woman keelhaul a man a good head taller than her only to falter halfway through. Not many could silence Ruffnut like that once she got going.

Astrid's smile grew as she saw Ruffnut discreetly massage her hand the moment she moved out of the port's sight. Tumble would be good for her.

A spring breeze rushed across her face and she sighed into it. With spring came planting, and planting would lead to harvest. And with the harvest came the celebrations...

Everyone seemed to be getting married this summer, everyone she grew up with, sparred with, dined with...

Everyone but her.

Call it fate, divine intervention, or simply bad luck, but every man who tried to barter with her father for her hand ultimately met their demise before any planning could fall underway—dying in the next
raid, falling to winter sickness, accidents at sea. It became such a common occurrence that Astrid's initial aversion to marriage was soon replaced by incredulity. And, on the occasion, insult.

A part of Astrid even began to fear she would grow to be something of a taboo, destined to fight alone and die alone because, eventually, no man would have the pluck to pursue her. It was an exaggerated fear; she's heard how superstition could run a village into madness but her situation hardly qualified. Still, she regarded her standing in the village with caution. A year ago, such a fate would have been fine with her, because a year ago the title of 'Best in Battle' had a different meaning. She wanted nothing but battle, but when she got nothing but battle she found it wanting. Something had changed from those days where bloodshed and action seemed the only activities that could get her heart racing. A desire, a need, deep within her changing body ached for something a little more and it left her with a caustic emptiness not even the thrill of warfare could curtain. She wasn't quite sure how to define it, if her age or her culture cultivated her reasoning behind this strange appetite.

These days she would look at Grizel and wonder if the weight of an infant in her arms would really make her glow like that, or Ragnhild and how, each day, she smiled a little more genuinely at her husband.

Astrid felt left behind, and it was such a familiar, sick-heavy feeling that she found herself visualizing the next man to try and woo her—a good, strong, Viking who would see her as a woman more than an ultimate prize. She was reaching the point where any man who risked the gods by asking for her would immediately garner some measure of respect, at the very least.

And with this realization came great annoyance because it was such a shallow, common desire among her age group and she hated sustaining either trait. Astrid was losing herself in this battle weary world. How many of these urges were her...and how many were expectation? She could no longer tell the difference between what she desired and what the village desired of her. Somewhere, at some point over the last year, these desires—those of the village and her own—had started to separate.

"Well, this will prove to be an interesting match."

Startled from her thoughts, Astrid turned to find Fishlegs besides her, the hefty blond following Ruffnut with his eyes, much as she had been doing before she drifted off into rumination.

She snorted, pushing frivolous thoughts of marriage to the depths of her mind. "Understatement."

"I'd give it an eighty percent likelihood of smoothing out," he admitted. "And we could use a little more happiness around here."

"Yeah," Astrid agreed, softening with the truth of that statement. "It's been rough."

That was another reason she found herself taken by these new desires. Back when raids only happened once, maybe twice, a month, fighting dragons was spare enough to be considered a treat. She trained and trained until the opportunity to show off her skills in battle arrived. Then she would recover and train some more. But lately it had been only battle, with less and less time to show off or train. It became more than just a job, it became the only thing she knew, the fun and novelty she found in her participation of protecting her village dulled into a duty. She wanted something more now. She was ready for it.

"We're due for another attack tonight," Fishlegs breathed, switching the topic. Astrid turned, incredulous, watching his profile stare strongly over the ocean view, in the direction of the accursed nest.
"We just had one not two weeks ago," she pointed out in an argument. She bore half a smile because he couldn't be serious.

But the grim expression remained on his face, the blond, wiry hairs of his beard too transparent to hide it.

"You haven't noticed the more frequent attacks?" he asked.

Astrid had. She had hoped it was unrelated to anything ominous, just a passing phase of the dragons. Something that maybe happened every dozen years or so.

"It's increasing," Fishlegs continued in a mellow, deep voice, "in size and frequency, and not just for us. It's... this phenomenon is spreading... reaching clans that never had to deal with this before. It'll start interfering with our trade soon, and not just on our end. This could upend our entire economy."

Astrid tried to listen, tried to take this all in, but her head shook slowly as his words spoke of nothing but a bleak future. She dearly hoped this was merely an exaggeration on Fishleg's behalf.

"How do you know this?"

Fishlegs shrugged one shoulder. "I've been speaking to Snotlout and the chief. I've been doing... individual research on these attacks. Charting them. It started out as a personal project but..."

He rubbed the bridge of his nose, appearing overcome. "My results were too concerning. Chief's allowed me to correspond with other tribes, and from there it's just grown. I've started a network of sorts... we keep each other informed..."

It wasn't confidence or self-assurance Astrid saw in the young man's posture. Anyone would have been honored with such a task appointed directly by the chief. If what Fishlegs admitted to her were true, then the once bumbling lad she recalled from her youth had gone from a farmer's son to an ambassador of sorts, and all on his own ambition. But Fishlegs showed no pride in this self-made status. Only despondency. He knew too much.

"How come no one knows of this?" How come she didn't know of this before now? How could this be the first time she heard of this? Her own reputation among the village was hard earned and well deserved in her humble opinion. She should have been informed.

Fishlegs swallowed, and she saw a little more of the awkward boy he once was. "Because it's not looking good. There's no obvious solution to this, Astrid. This isn't something that's just going to blow over on its own. We want to keep down the panic, manage the situation while we can, but... but if things keep escalating as they have been..." he drew his lips into his mouth for a moment, the words catching in his throat. His eyes hardened and set their focus over the skyline, into the beyond.

"We may be the last generation of Berk."

Astrid wrenched a hand to her mouth, her gasp breathing in the resin coating her wraps. Somehow, she knew Fishlegs was not exaggerating. But she never knew things were quite that bad; she assumed they simply hit a rough patch that it would blow over. She would never have guessed at a such a bleak future.

"Gods... What will we do?" This didn't sound like something she could train day and night for to defeat. She was powerful, she was strong, but she wasn't a god. She couldn't contain this growing dragon problem as it needed to be contained. The entire effort of their village couldn't do it.

That was why the Chief pulled Fishlegs up for this networking thing. Soon tribes and clans and rivalries wouldn't matter when their entire race faced ultimate defeat. If what Fishlegs implied were
true, then the destruction of villages would spread as the nest grew.

Was this a forewarning of Ragnarok? Was it upon them already?

Astrid knew she was working herself up into unnecessary hysterics, but how else was she supposed to act with the burden of information dropped on her? She experienced the change first hand, now she was having it explained to her.

She swallowed against her quickly beating heart, hoping her breathing hadn't shifted more than that quick catch. She didn't deal well with sudden loss of control in any nature; she knew this of herself by now. Once she had time to think over it, to regain a little more rational, her confidence would return to where it belonged—mind, body and soul.

Fishlegs shrugged again, maintaining this new, calmness Astrid never would have thought he could carry. But it helped to calm her.

"Hang on, I guess. Keep fighting. Until..." He trailed off, seeming to realize he said too much as he clenched his jaw.

"Until what?" Astrid used that voice. The one that promised a good broken wrist if she wasn't given the exact details she sought. This was her home, the fate of her village; she wanted to know the truth. She wanted to be prepared to do whatever necessary to preserve it. She passed up the moment for embracing the indignation that this was kept from her, kept from many of their warriors for so long. A situation as grave as this would not be solved with resentment.

Fishlegs released a heavy breath, his line of sight settling to his feet as resignation weighed down his shoulders. There was no point in keeping Astrid in the dark any longer. She was an asset to their village—intelligent, capable—and now more privy to the situation at hand than most of the older generation.

"There's a rumor," Fishlegs began, turning to face her. He drew his olive eyes up to meet hers for what could have been the first time in their impromptu conversation. "A rumor among the higher ups..."

Astrid arched an eyebrow, never a fan of suspense.

"A rumor?"

A rumor that the dragons would die out? That help was coming? That another clan had discovered the nest?

"There's a rumor that Hiccup will come back."

########

::I hate you:: Toothless snarled vehemently. ::You are the worst friend ever::

From the piled rocks of the shoreline, Hiccup swiveled over his shoulder and smiled. His ponytail flipped in the winds of a prevailing storm, the wild strands that escaped passed his eyes like hanging sheets on a line. He placed his hands on his hips, careful to balance himself correctly on the slippery footing. The task was extra challenging due to him hitting a second growth spurt, leaving him—one more—with unmastered, long limbs.
"Come on, you knew this was coming," he grinned roguishly, unaffected by the spray of water breaking against the rocks.

They had been in this situation before, in attitude and intent. But back then both males harbored far more nervousness. Back then, Hiccup was much less excited and Toothless much less annoyed.

::I was hoping you'd grow out of your need to torment my peace of mind::

"Then you only have yourself to blame. You should know better."

::This is absurd! Why do you insist on pushing your luck like this?::

"I'm not pushing my luck! This is the safest thing I've done in weeks!" Hiccup leveled a finger at the dragon clinging to the very edges of the forest. "You're the one who thought it would be a great idea to hunt on the land clearly entitled 'No Trespassing'." He raised his voice a pitch, "Oh, rules like that don't apply to us! What? Faeries? They're harmless!"

He finished is mockery with a very flat, very irate stare.

Toothless seemed to struggle for a moment, ::I—that's—that's nothing compared to this!::

"I got spanked by a tree!" Hiccup snapped.

::Don't change the subject:: Toothless rejoined just as waspish, refusing to dwell on the fact that his tail hadn't quite stopped stinging from that encounter. ::Just step away from the water and we'll pretend this never happened::

The teen waved him off with a snort and turned back to the Channel.

"This is happening."

::I'm gagging. I'm retching already::

"You're being dramatic," he drawled. "I made a promise, remember?"

::There are other ways to get there!:: The dragon started to sound desperate. ::Just—just kick your legs really hard, or something!::

Hiccup rolled his eyes, not bothering to face the Night Fury who was getting more irrational with each output.

"You know as well as I do that there is not another way."

And, as though waiting for the timeliest arrival, a sea serpent burst forth from the deceptively deep waterline.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Holy ellipses batman!

Jumped around a lot. Much timeskipping. I'd wager I covered about two-three months in
this chapter alone. As I said in some review responses, I'm only going to cover the important moments on his ride home, and the rest of his adventures will be alluded to.

So we finally get to see Framherja in action! Some guessed it right off the bat, and some, I'm happy to say, I managed to deceive. I think. Unless you lie to me :)

What's this? Is Fishlegs pulling a Neville Longbottom? We'll be getting into Fishlegs' head more in a later chapter, same with Astrid's. The time for that simply hasn't arrived yet.

So I gave you lots of Berk. Of course, Hiccup is only a couple chapters away from Berk itself, so I suppose there's nothing BUT Berk in store for you. And some Camicazi...NEXT!
Deserved

Chapter Summary

Hiccup runs into an unexpected, old friend as he travels north. He tries to make his first Viking ally.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Deserved

"Secure the foot! Batten down those hatches! Someone get on that bow line!"

The Vikings of Berk moved back and forth along the docks, loading the knörr with mead barrels, furs, and weapons, spurred along by Snotlout Jorgenson's booming orders. He had nothing on Stoick the Vast's formidable holler, but he effectively drowned out the cawing gulls, and that in itself showed promising aptitude for the future chief.

"Is that the last of them?" Snotlout asked the Viking who just settled a barrel heavily between thwarts.

"Aye," the man nodded. "We're about chock-a-block."

Snotlout returned the gruff nod with one of his own.

"Right" Turning to the deck he barked, "Finish raising that sail! Man the oars!"

The unit of men jumped to task, repeating the shout as if it hadn't been heard the first time. Ropes were yanked, pulleys utilized, and the great, painted sheet spread to the skies.

The young man issuing orders showed no outward approval on his face, but inside he had to admire the efficiency at which the Vikings of his village operated. No movement went wasted; no one stumbled into each other, or stood, blank-faced, wondering what he could do. It was with practiced knowhow that these men preformed their tasks with the utmost professionalism.

Snotlout rested a hand on the sternpost and turned his attention back to the village, his home that still looked as damaged as it had been three days ago after a most brutal raid. They were running out of resources. Repairs were slowing and the dragons came wave after wave, unmindful to their struggles to recuperate. Little by little, Berk was being chipped away like a hatchet to an oak. They would hold a little longer—certainly, if he had anything to say about it—but even those who didn't fight started to feel the wear on their resilience.

He was leading this hunting expedition in preparation for chieftainship, to go to greater lengths to provide food for his village, but the position of leadership was looking less and less appealing as he prepared to take over a dying village.

His disparaging thoughts disrupted when an older girl crossing the port to the fisher's dock caught his wandering eye. She blushed, possibly recalling the night they had spent together, and, tucking her head, scuttled onward.
"Dude..." Snotlout startled, finding Tuffnut at his side, dreads swaying as he shook his head in the direction of the girl. The muttered word from the blond sounded close to reproach. "Is it okay that you..."

Tuffnut made a crude gesture with his hand towards Ricket's disappearing form.

Snotlout shrugged, appearing sullen. "I don't rightly care much. Everyone will look the other way anyway. We have bigger problems to worry about than fidelity."

"We need the meat," Tuffnut agreed. He harbored no personal care for Snotlout's reputation, other than the obvious fact that his best friend wanted the chieftainship enough to avoid any potentially damaging scandals. He couldn't blame Snotlout in the slightest for his backroom pursuit of the baker's daughter. She turned out rather attractive from the buck-toothed little troll she once was and, had he just a shred less character, he would have taken a stab at her himself.

"Abaft the mainmast," the stockier boy suddenly ordered, as if picking up on Tuffnut's less than honorable thoughts. "You're on the rudder."

The taller boy grinned.

"I love it when you get all commanding on me."

Snotlout smacked the back of Tuffnut's head. "Just sit your ass on that þopta!"

"Sure thing boss," Tuffnut saluted with exaggerated mockery. He got a punch to the shoulder for it, but Snotlout was smiling again.

It had yet to settle in Tuffnut's mind that his boyhood friend would one day lead the tribe. He only saw 'Lout the Luckster, the guy he would hock loogies off the piers with and climb trees to spy on the women's Laugardagur time. They still took time out of the day to make inappropriate jokes regarding everything under Sól's govern.

And yet, for all that, Tuffnut saw the changes as well. This was a man who wanted the job, who wanted things to work out in his favor, even if it meant marching the drab path to maturity. Snotlout started to take his grooming seriously, and it was around the time they stopped hunting for the nest and focused on defense that this drive took hold. He focused on his studies as best he could, he attended the þing, taking the floor more and more often, warming his audience a little faster each time, and Tuffnut suspected Snotlout trained with his hammer and swordplay more than Astrid did.

Hell, the twin noticed Lout hanging around old Fishlegs, looking over the nerd's charts with something akin to interest.

Snotlout the Snotface, they called him in their youth—the boorish brute with the brawn of a Viking and the brains of a bull. These days, Tuffnut heard more and more often "Snotlout the Steadfast" as a publically dubbed and likely permanent title. The village, once fretting over the fate of their future leadership, now looked on in approval at Snotlout's obvious efforts to meet each standard set by the Haddock line. It had been nearly one hundred and fifty years since the headman of their clan shifted lineage. They were already in a time of change—what was one more?

"Alright!" Snotlout called in his new, commanding voice that managed to sound a little less obnoxious with each passing day. "Let's set sail!"

The boat lurched as the sails caught wind, and broad, armored backs began to pump back and forth...
with the strokes of their oars.

Sometimes, Tuffnut felt left behind. He was still a poor, farmer's son, still barely literate, with only vigor and daring on his side. He had no title to his name yet, no reputation aside from an adolescent terror. Snotlout would be chief, Fishlegs spent more time in the company of the chief than Tuffnut could reason out, and his own sister was getting married in a month's time—which, to this day, remained a concept his mind could not comprehend.

But stagnancy would not be accepted. Not by him. Not while everyone else prospered from within these hard times. This was his third hunting expedition since the year's first ice broke. He gained greater experience on the sea with each short trip, and, come next spring, he would depart from Berk for months on end. Out on a real voyage, to the south, where he would trade and barter and fight and drink and meet women of every size. Then, when he had his fill of the free life, he would return to his village with his riches and experiences to wait out the winter until the next spring, when he would travel just a little bit further than the last.

Provided he had a village to return to.

The young Viking dragged his assigned handle to the right, grunting with the effort involved with moving a rudder. The boat turned toward their destination, horizontal to the village, and Tuffnut received a sudden, clear view of the ruined fishing dock.

It would take weeks to repair the harbor, seeing as homes and weapons got first priority with the available lumber. Tuffnut couldn't imagine having to be the one to tell the Fishermen they came last in the long line of renovation, knowing another raid would probably set back that promised date even more. The darker side to responsibility grew more and more apparent with every sacrifice the villagers had to make, just to remain standing strong.

There were times when Tuffnut didn't envy Lout in the least.

Northumbria was everything Hiccup remembered it as: dirty peasants with grime-riddled faces trudging along the countryside, crowded ports and crude language along the coast, and this monotheistic religion spreading across both regions faster than anything plague he'd ever heard of.

Once again, the boys made the choice to travel out over water during the night, and return to the closest safety for daytime rest. While traveling through the mainland meant they were less likely to run into humans, Toothless had a strong preference for saltwater fish, and Hiccup quite enjoyed the opportunity to experience the trades and people coastal villages had to offer. As long as they stayed on their guard, and played to their strengths, they would manage just fine.

Hiccup's recent encounter with the mermaids turned out quite differently than his first. Something had changed, he knew right from the start by the more openly, feral grins they welcomed him with, and he had a good idea what when they no longer referred to him as "man-child" but as the "man who walks in our caves".

They gave him all the same treatment as before—the gillyale, the appropriate reactions to each point in his tale, the excessive giggling that made him feel strangely exposed—but there was something added to it. Or, perhaps, something was taken away. He felt a new jeopardy from being in their presence, one that he acknowledge before, but hadn't felt as exposed to—like a protective force he
hadn't appreciated before had been removed.

He endured this perception, carrying out is promise as calmly as he could. The girls seemed to enjoy hearing a story no matter who it came from, and, like last time, pouted when he arrived at current events.

Hiccup suspected that, had his stories not been so entertaining—and promised to continue to entertain—the mermaids would have chosen the ending for him, as they, doubtlessly, had done countless times before.

As it turned out, he didn't leave unscathed. It was Marmara who sprang up from the water, grabbed the back of his head with nails that cut into his neck, and captured his mouth in a violent kiss involving more teeth than he’d ever experienced before. His lip bled, but when she pulled away, the fangs she swore he felt puncture his skin were blunted once more.

Then dragon rider was then told it would be in his best interest to continue the story one day, provided he survived his encounter with the demon he vowed to defeat.

Hiccup knew he would return. He knew the underwater cavern suddenly became more dangerous to him—the scar on his lip and the pale crescents branded into the back of his neck proved as much—but he wanted to come back. He was playing with fire, and it was exciting to him. These beautiful mermaid sisters—once teasing towards him, and later rough—put him in the sort of situation where he wanted to test his luck.

Hiccup reemerged from the serpent’s mouth later that day, entrusted back in Toothless' care, and realizing there was something, very, very wrong with him.

However, the most disturbing thing Hiccup encountered on his polar-bound journey, far more than the behavior of the mermaids, were the rumors. Anytime he stopped in a town and was asked about his destination, the answer 'North' would get him headshakes and much clicking of the tongue. He was warned, in English, French and Norse, of the cursed lands that had been taken over by fire beasts. Rumors of plagues, death and destruction bubbled up with any mention of the Faroes or Shetlands or Iceland.

Hiccup wasn’t overly concerned at first; the North had a rough reputation in those parts, and anyone raised south of Straumey was considered "soft"—for soft-stomached and soft-minded. Hiccup tried to keep an open mind when meeting new people, but sometimes the ugly stigmas with which he was raised painted his reception to these warnings as the South’s feeble idea of what constituted as danger.

The first small whit of proof he found in these rumors were the ones delivered in his home language. The closer he came to Berk, the more and more Norse-speaking farmers he encountered. Traders and travelers, he expected, but an obvious migration had begun. Something was driving Northmen from their homes. From the repeated reference to them, he'd bet his three remaining rubies that particular 'something' involved dragons.

It was a situation Hiccup knew he would meet head on soon enough. While he didn't want to work himself up over what could be nothing more than wild suspicions, his gut began to tell him something had gone very wrong in the North. He feared he and Toothless had less time for themselves than they thought.

Though this unconfirmed press for time began to dampen his spirits, Hiccup was determined to enjoy each day on the road as best he could. He still believed his involvement wasn't all that crucial to his village's direct survival. These people who looked to the North with wide-eyed fear were the same
people who likely didn't know how to fight dragons. He never recalled seeing anyone from Berk or her neighboring Viking tribes, which greatly diminished the credence of the hearsay.

He and Toothless settled on the largest of the Farne Islands that morning. A dead seal, speared and carried by Toothless' claws, was half devoured after Hiccup awakened mid-afternoon. The meat was delicious; slightly undercooked with a more flavorful taste Hiccup had taken to over time. He left the carcass partially submerged in the lapping iced waters of the North Sea to keep it salted and fresh for a later meal. Toothless climbed to one of the higher bows of a tree, no doubt licking the last traces of blood from his chops and preparing to sleep a little longer.

With a full belly and a handful of silver pieces stretching the pouch caught between his belt and tunic, Hiccup saw an opportunity to visit the trading port on the other side of the island—one that faced the mainland.

He didn't mind the crowds and shouting and the onslaught of smells when no one looked twice at him. Being around too many people for too long often put him on edge, but Hiccup would always enjoy seeing the mingling of culture, receiving exposure to the different crafts and languages and foods that he had only just begun to acclimate to.

A stand of furs first caught his attention, his eyes moving between the beaver and the goat hair cloaks. Summer was approaching, but Hiccup knew it would be in his best interest to buy warmer clothes, especially when Berk's most torrid, summer day would match with the relatively mild spring of Miklagard. Already, the temperature had dropped several times to raise goosebumps up the bare area of his arms and he had taken to doubling up on layers during their night flies.

He pinched the thin, goat-haired cloak between his fingers, liking the way it slipped against his skin. Hiccup couldn't stop the low chuckle that escaped his lips. Out in the world, banking on survival, and he goes and buys half of what he needs. Often times the other half was stolen, and none of it possible without Toothless. The dragon had taught him stealth, that's for sure.

Thinking back on it, it was in his first weeks with the dragon that he really fell into his underhanded ways, sneaking in and out of the village, misleading the villagers, never boasting of his wins, but never bothering to correct their assumptions either...

What a bad influence.

"Y'all right, mate?"

Hiccup spared a glance to his left at the sudden voice, spotting two, grimy sailors. One leaned against the wooden pailing with arms crossed, the other bent over, wincing, and cupping his groin.

The grimacing one hissed at his smug companion.

"No, I ain't all right! Damn woman smashed me nuts! I'll never have heirs," he squeaked.

His friend outright laughed. "Where is she? I'll congratulate her..."

"Git! I couldn't point her out if I tried. Can't even tell them apart! There's a whole army o' them, just set port this morning and took over the damn town!"

Hiccup kept his eyes on the piles of furs, but his movements of feeling each material stilled. An army of women?

"Ha! No sir!"
"Aye, looked stocked too. I think they're pirates. No rhyme or reason for them to be that well off with no men around."

"Pack o' lady pirates, eh?" Hiccup could hear the grin in the fit one's voice.

"Ugh. Don't even think about it lest you want to end up like me...Oi! You make a habit of eavesdropping, do yeh?"

Startled at the change in tone, Hiccup looked over at the Saxon sailors. Perhaps he had been too obvious in his interest, for the pained one glared at him while his still-chuckling friend looked him up and down with raised eyebrows.

"I don't understand you!" Hiccup exclaimed in his native language, pulling his best "bewildered" face.

The grumpy sailor snorted, his face not softening.

"Damn Northmen..." He griped, still massaging the area between his legs.

The other sailor pulled away from his resting spot and shook his head.

"We'll be seein' a lot more given the state o' things up there..."

"This." Hiccup pointed to a pile-woven cloak and tossed at the merchant one penny—what he thought was plenty for the garment. He received a hesitant look at the bartering, but an impatient expression later had Hiccup walking off with his purchase.

'State o' things up there...'

There it was again; another reference to something horrible up north. What was causing all these Northmen to travel south?

Before Hiccup could begin to fully trouble himself with the matter, a familiarly accented voice caught his attention.

"Oi!"

He glanced up. His feet jerked to a stop a moment later.

A young woman stood across from him, blocking his most direct route out of the port town. Wild blonde hair flowed down her back, unchecked and unbraided, highlighting the unusually dark clothing—clothing swathed tightly around her figure with just enough creases to keep him wondering if there were more than a body hidden within. A wrap covered the sizable bust with nothing but a dark, fur vest overtop, and knives hung off every belt loop imaginable. She rested her weight on one jutted hip, her expression flat with dark, blue eyes narrowed on him.

Her name trickled through his lips in an embarrassing stutter.

"C-C-Cami?"

And he really had to pose it as a question, because, not only did she look different—just barely recognizable as his childhood friend—but she behaved differently. Some remarkable calmness exuded from her stance, cooler than he'd ever seen her, and yet, she still had that energy that was wholly her, fierce and cocky. It was a combination that filled him with an incomprehensible dread.
He should have been more shocked at her sudden and unexpected appearance—*again*—or at the odds of running into her at a port he just *happened* to visit, but his mind kept blundering at different parts of her rather than taking in the whole picture.

"Hiccup," she said, sounding completely unaffected at running into him. "You look a sight taller."

Their height difference was now more apparent than ever, with the top of her head just reaching his chin. Still, she had grown as well. Taller, *rounder* in some areas, the flat of her navel emphasized by the overhang of her top, her chin more pointed, her lips pressed and curved...

Or maybe they were always shaped like that and he never felt the impulse to look at them before.

For some reason Hiccup found the contours of her neck and its slender length more noteworthy than anything else.

"Yeah..." he managed to breath out, giving himself a mental slap to the face for letting his mind wander about *her*.

He didn't know what to say. She wasn't yelling at him, but something in her voice came cold, like he deserved a fury she reserved for later. She had never treated him like this before.

"So," Camicazi began in that discomforting, light tone, "where's your dragon?"

He winced. Oh yes, *that*. Why had he suddenly forgotten that she was a Northern Viking in close connection with Berk? Of *course* she heard of his defection, directly from the most opinioned mouths, no doubt.

Hiccup opened his mouth, wondering how to handle this. Was she so mad over it? Would she hit him?

He observed her posture with leery eyes—this calmness he'd never seen on her before so out of place he felt on edge.
No. It's not like she'd attack him in the middle of a busy port.

Then again, it seemed a Bog Burglar had just downed that sailor not too long ago. And, for the first time, Camicazi looked like a Bog Burglar—all tantalizing curves and dangerous attraction and forbidding. A very 'look but don't touch' aura had developed sometime between their last chance upon and now.

He cleared his throat in a weak cough. "Hiding. There are a lot of humans around."

She made a noncommittal noise, the only movement on her face the careful arch of an eyebrow.

"Was he hiding when I last ran into you?"

Another, delicately posed question. Hiccup reacted again as though they were direct blows. He didn't like this side of her, this manipulative and feminine bearing she addressed him with. He associated her with the frank openness of a Viking, not the scheming ways of a city woman. He didn't want his perception of her altered, and absolutely not because of his actions that she, apparently, took offense to.

The best thing he could do was answer her honestly. He still wanted her as his friend. He could salvage this. Hopefully.

"Sleeping, I think," he tried to recall. It seemed a lifetime ago, back when he was unsure of his chosen way. Hiccup shook his head, again, finding it hard to focus. "Look, Cami, I'm sorry I didn't tell you, but...well, I'd just been outlawed. I was all out of sorts. I-I-I know how bad it all looks, you probably only heard the worst, but, I swear to you, dragons are not what we think they are. I can prove it, if you'll just let me." At her dubious expression he felt he had to add, "Come on, it's me. I'm not malicious. I didn't do this to hurt people."

He must have said something right, because some of the tension released from her shoulders, and her eyes closed with an exasperated sigh.

"I understand why you didn't tell me. Sort of."

His face lightened, "You—you do?"

She opened her eyes, the sun reflecting in them a violet hue he hadn't recalled before, and she stepped closer. Hiccup found his stare momentarily drawn to the shifting of her hips, appearing wider beneath the cinch of her waist. This was Camicazi, he reminded himself. He knew from an early age she would grow up to be dangerous and capable, and, ultimately, technically, a woman. He just never imagined she would grow up to be...this.

"But I have to ask." Her stringent voice returned his gaze to hers. "Did you even try to find a way of staying?"

For reasons unknown to him, Hiccup found himself taken aback by the question. It seemed more appropriate of something his father would ask him, not the girl who always supported a grand adventure, especially those of the impromptu sort.

"I thought of several but..." How would he explain his logic? He hadn't understood it himself at the time. He still didn't understand it today. It was impulse, a half-thought out, knee-jerk reaction to being put on the spot. He just...went with the flow. Something else he would have never trusted himself to do without Toothless by his side—not to the extent he had gone.

A heavy sigh escaped Hiccup's lips without him realizing how antagonized it made him appear.
"Look, I left. That's all I can really say, alright? And I don't regret it."

"You don't...?" Crap, she was using that calculating voice again. Camicazi's jaw clenched, something he recalled as a telltale sign of mounting anger, and she took another step forward. "Because of you..." he hadn't realized how close she had gotten until her fist struck him in the chest. "Because of you! Because you left!" She hit him again with each growled, inconclusive statement, and he took it, grunting with every contact, because he had no idea what was going on. "I! Am! Marrying! Snot! Lout!"

The bruises that would no doubt blossom from beneath his skin tingled down to numbness, and the laughs and stares of anyone who bothered to pay them any mind were lost against the rush of mystification following that statement.

He gripped her fist when she tried to hit him again, clutching her wrist with his other hand when she tried to yank her arm back. Her struggles quickly ceased, the rage that came so suddenly stilling into shock as he looked down at her with a dark and serious expression.

"You're what?" Perhaps he hadn't meant to say it so throaty, as a nearby couple jumped with the severity of his response, but at least it calmed her down.

"I—yes!" And with a great effort she yanked her arm free of his hold. She didn't attack him again. "We're finally uniting our tribes after generations of joking about it. It's not a joke anymore. It's happening."

"But..." None of it made sense. They didn't do that—not her tribe. Never. And Snotlout? Really? "You're a Bog Burglar..."

She snorted. An ugly contempt twisted her features, poisoning her voice into causticity. "Yeah, I know, right? The first ever to be put in an arranged marriage! What an honor!"

Hiccup shook his head, too many questions bumping into each other to stand out above the rest. "What—how—?"

"It has to do with the situation that's going on..." She muttered. Much of her ire had deflated—like she had worked this moment over in her head for so long that she found reality wanting. "It's a mess. Everything is changing...our ways, our traditions. I can't even explain how bad it's gotten."

"Please, explain it to me," Hiccup stressed. He couldn't paint this as exaggerations and misunderstandings anymore, not with Camicazi confirming the worst of his half-cocked theories right in front of him. "And explain to me how it's my fault."

So he had left. If anything, it should have made things easier for his tribe. Berk almost enjoyed their confrontation with dragons. It defined them, gave them more opportunities to impress the gods. He had only ever gotten in the way. How could the removal of his presence ever be considered unfavorable? And how did his leaving lead her into an arranged marriage?

Camicazi narrowed her eyes again, whether it was strong attitude or the reminder of whatever blame he deserved to partake in, something was about to set her off again.

"Well, for starters, if you were still in the damn village I would be marrying you!" She poked him harshly in the chest, in the same concentrated area where she focused her punching.

Hiccup winced, pulling back and rubbing the sore area. "And that's better, how?"

"A sight better than Snotlout," she nearly shrieked. "He still hocks up balls of snot and spits it off the
"You did that too," Hiccup felt he had to point out amidst all his mental bedlam.

"That's different! I'm a girl. At least when I do it, it looks good."

Hiccup wouldn't argue this because she seemed more volatile than normal and she had taken up this new habit of directing her frustrations on him. Astrid and Ruffnut he would expect of this, but Camicazi, until now, had always been the friend he trusted to not subject him to her temper.

Then again, she honestly believed he deserved this. Something he had to get to the bottom of.

"I still don't understand why this marriage is happening."

She heaved an irritated sigh, the expansion of her chest so not worth focusing his attention on. Even if it sort-of happened.

"We don't travel as much anymore," she started. "We can't. Our home village is being attacked by dragons more and more, like yours was. I mean, this thing is spreading. And now everything's changing. Changing enough that my mum and your dad decided it was time for a damn proper alliance!"

"It's that bad?" Hiccup whispered. He would have pressed her for more details regarding this "thing" that was "spreading", but Camicazi bore such a troubled look on her features that he feared she was going to cry.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled.

Her eyes hardened—and the spark of anger ignited within relieved him more than it should have. Fists were easier to deal with than tears.

"You're sorry? You're sorry I'm marrying Snotlout? Or your sorry that our entire culture is dying while you're off—off—buying furs and...and drinking...and who knows what!"

She looked ready to hit him again.

"Well, I still don't understand how it's my fault—"

"I wouldn't be marrying Snotlout for one thing!" she snapped. The people who had lost interest once Camicazi stopped punching him were back to staring again.

Why did she always have to cause a scene?

Hiccup made the mistake of shushing her.

"Don't you 'shh' me!" she snarled. She waved her hands angrily as she spoke, her hair flying with each movement painting the alluring picture of a jungle cat. "You left and everything went to Hel!"

"Cami—"

"Your dad was a mess! He had to chose Snotlout as next-in-line—"

"Look—"

"No! Your entire village is changing, and now mine is, and you don't even care enough to—"
"You're being unreasonable. I know you're upset—"

"You don't know anything—you left, you—lied—"

Hiccup grabbed her shoulders and kissed her in a spare moment of a closed mouth. It was fast, a brief touching of lips, and he silently patted himself on the back for marking hers correctly in the first place given the circumstances. Most importantly, it shut her up.

He pulled away from her almost as fast as the duration of the peck itself, mostly for self-preservation reasons but also for shock of his own actions.

Camicazi's mouth opened and closed, working in wordless stupefaction as she stared, wide-eyed, at the boy she used to think of as an older, little brother. Hiccup knew his own expression couldn't have been too far off from matching.

"Y-you kissed me!" she finally stuttered out. She touched the fleshiest part of her bottom lip as if unsure it were still a part of her face.

Hiccup had no explanation for himself, so he tried to think back on any reason she deserved what he just did. His chest continued to throb.

"Well...you hit me!"

"But you just kissed me!" she repeated, louder. "You!"

More people stared.

"I'll kiss you again if you don't calm down!" he threatened.

Camicazi threw a hand over her mouth.

"I'm calm! I'm calm!"

Hiccup wasn't quite sure how to take that. But, awkward kissing reaction aside, some element of normalcy had returned between them. He could recognize her a little better as the girl he grew up with. And if there were anyone—any human—he would first share the full truth of his life with, it would be her.

"Would it help if I introduce you to Toothless?"

Camicazi slowly lowered her hand from her mouth.

"Who?"

########

Camicazi sat on the opposite side of the campfire from the Night Fury, still thoroughly fascinated with the beast of lore despite enduring its presence for the rest of daylight. Even more fascinating was the way Hiccup leaned against the dragon like he was a comfy bedroll rather than a wild beast perfectly capable of tearing the boy's head off with one chomp. Over the leftover seal, the outlaw regaled her with a dressed down version of the last two years. Not once, throughout Hiccup's outline of the meeting, befriending, and journeying, did she move her eyes from the duo. This led to her missing her mouth on several occasions as she tried to feed herself the salty seal meat.
The young Bog heiress feared she wasn't able to fully hide her apprehension upon her first introduction to the dark monster—Toothless' reputation preceded him, after all—but all negative emotions were eradicated as soon as Hiccup moved her hand to touch the smooth, surprisingly warm scales of the dragon's hide. She ended up giving Toothless a good belly rub that had the dragon squirming on the ground like a kitten, and from there her entire view of her generation-long enemy was broken down and reworked.

Had she met the dragon a year ago, she would have immediately demanded a ride, desperate for a taste of anything so forbidden as the skies. A year ago, her tribe only trained for the occasional clash with the beasts, with far more effort thrown into sea battles and pirating. A year ago, such short exposure to their beastly nature would have left her in a far better mind for change.

But the Bog Burglars had been torn apart, supplies ravaged and village ransacked, to the point where such a fast acceptance of a dragon's gift left her wary.

She had raised weapons against differently colors scales than the ones she pampered, she felt the heat of their fire and saw the power of their ruthless anger. She had every, horrible, dragon tale used to keep children's behavior in line proven true. And now she was hearing an unprecedented account of their war, shown a completely new side to dragons, expected to somehow work this into a plausible reality.

Toothless watched the recently arrived woman with the same intensity that she bestowed upon him, though with far less wariness. He could sense her affection towards his boy. These two seemed to have a deep friendship that connected them through an overlying tension palpable even to a dragon. Toothless suspected there was something very human going on between the two; something that would take Hiccup a good day to fully manage to explain it to him.

::This woman was from your tribe?:: Toothless ventured. The only introduction he received regarding the female was a name, 'Camicazi', and that she was 'an old friend'.

"Friends of a tribe," Hiccup corrected from against his hide.

Camicazi stared at Hiccup. "What?"

"I was talking to him," Hiccup explained with such normalcy that Camicazi found herself accepting that easily.

"Is it safe to have him so close to all those people?" she asked. She liked Toothless, there was something absolutely heartwarming about the way he would wiggle his tail and let his tongue loll out of his mouth as Hiccup showed her the best places to scratch. But she couldn't stop her mind from overlapping the absolute horror he was capable of.

Toothless showed no offense to this question. He made a 'whump'ing noise from his throat and rested his chin on his paws. Hiccup grinned and scratched behind a jawfin.

"Do you care that much about their safety?"

"No, but you do."

Hiccup couldn't help but care about people, especially ones whose deaths he could have an indirect hand in. At least, that's how she remembered him as. She certainly hoped he hadn't changed so much as to become callous. She already had trouble connecting the boy from her memory to the young man who caught her punch.

Hiccup shook his head, "Trust me, looking at our histories, I'd say I'm more dangerous to people
than he is."

Camicazi chuckled at that, and it warmed Hiccup to see her relaxing after their initial reunion. They were pretending the kiss never happened, they were even pretending Camicazi's meltdown didn't happen. Still, something between them was strained, and it could have been Hiccup's actions towards her, or the fact that, technically, their loyalties no longer should have allowed them to be friends. Thankfully, neither of them put much penchant in the expectations of others.

"So it's all true? This thing about the war being controlled by one dragon?" Camicazi asked, because she felt she had to. It would give the beginnings of an explanation for the phenomenon that was happening up North.

"I'm not sure it's even a dragon," Hiccup said softly. "But yes."

"That changes things quite a bit." Camicazi couldn't help but wonder if, someday, she could have a dragon companion as Hiccup had Toothless. She needed chance and luck on her side to even consider it a possibility, but once the idea popped up in her head, it would forever remain a secret hope.

"Yeah," Hiccup agreed. "So, are you going to tell me what's been up on your end? I still don't understand how you're getting married. I mean...you're...you're a—"

"A Bog Burglar, yes I know," She muttered. She took a breath and forced a smile on her face that looked so strained Hiccup would have preferred she hadn't bothered at all. "Tell ya' what. You buy me a drink and I'll explain the whole situation to you."

::Go:: Toothless urged before Hiccup could get a single word out. The human glanced down at his friend.

"I—"

::Go:: Toothless repeated. ::This human is special to you. You were close, weren't you? Maybe you could learn more about what we're getting into. I don't think she's very comfortable around me::

Hiccup nodded, knowing the dragon was right. If there were any human who would share his enthusiasm for flying dragons, it would have been Camicazi. Regrettably, he feared he was too late in exposing her. Whatever happened up north, whatever was happening, was affecting the Vikings every bit—if not more—than the trading and farming Northmen.

Maybe revealing Toothless to Camicazi when he last saw her could have prevented this, could have saved her from this insecurity, could have given him another ally willing to support interspecies friendship.

Another decision with alternate consequences he could only speculate about.

"Alright," he agreed. "One drink."

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They managed to match each other, ale for ale, with Camicazi teasing Hiccup about having a stronger alcohol tolerance than she expected from a sissy, and Hiccup remarking on her own endurance for having such a short stature. Their refreshing banter only punctuated what ended up
being mostly sobering matters.

Hiccup learned of an increasing frequency in dragon attacks—what he remembered as a bimonthly occurrence now became weekly raids in some areas. As Camicazi fed Hiccup information from the human's end, his own mind supplanted what he knew from Toothless. Hearing that the raids extended in precinct told Hiccup the demon's hold over the dragons had as well—just as Toothless said would happen. It was spreading by the *tylpt*, and as the demon gained power, it gained an army, and as it gained an army, it gained power. It was on an upswing. What first occurred over centuries had concentrated to decades without the humans realizing it thanks to their short life spans. Then to years, possibly to months, and now, by the week, they were seeing a difference. Hiccup thought they had years to deal with this—that the demon's power would grow at a similar rate to what it had been—but, apparently, their time of departure just happened to precede the tipping point.

Hiccup had to get up there, he had to stop this before it got out of hand, and yet...he didn't rightly know how. He couldn't without gathering more information first. Even then, the sheer mechanics of victory seemed impossible. The most likely situation would involve him and Toothless getting themselves killed, followed by the end of Vikingdom as they knew it.

Hiccup took a deep swallow from his mug, the flavor of sweet ale strong in the gruit. What a cheerful prospect.

"It's not just us," Camicazi went on, nose hanging over the rim of her own drink. "It's villages who are more unprepared than the bloody Saxons would be. That's why all these northerners are coming down here—they got nowhere else to go. Alliances are being forged left and right by those that *are* staying; villages that used to fight constantly are banding together just to survive...and that's when our villages decided it was time to make a more concrete one—alliance, that is. Snotlout's taking over, and I'm to marry him and provide an heir. Two, if I can. I need to give at least one daughter to go to my tribe. Berk said they'd prefer a son, but your dad demanded there be at least be a *legitimate* heir. I don't think he wants any more confusion over who's to take over ever again..."

She stopped then, her eyes unfocused on her leaden, wavering reflection.

"I'm not even going to be a Bog Burglar anymore... I'm going to be another baby-making, house wife who gets fat and thinks up a list of excuses not to be touched by her *husband,*" she choked on the word.

Hiccup could think of nothing to say. The dragon situation he would do what he could with, but the politics of a village he wasn't even a part of anymore was out of his hands.

"Maybe there's a way around it?" he tried. "Or maybe it won't be as bad as you think?" Who was he trying to convince? Of course it would be. Marriage for Camicazi would be like someone telling him he had to spend the rest of his life with both feet on the ground.

Camicazi gripped the hair above her forehead, resting her weight on her elbow, and appearing more distraught than Hiccup had ever seen her.

"I can't do it. I can't! The more I think about it, the more it makes me sick. I know, I'm supposed to set an example, lead the way in to this new era that's supposedly going to help us survive—tribes have been merging left and right—but...I just...I just can't..."

Hiccup didn't want to see her like this; this wasn't his friend of old who would find humor in any situation, find any misfortune a challenge to be bested.

"Cami..."
She shook her head. "I know its selfish of me to say this but I...I don't want to get married for the sake of my tribe."

"Cami," Hiccup cut in, because he couldn't stand to see her so out of sorts like this. He put a hand on her bare shoulder; hardly registering the missing fur vest she arrived in. "Listen to me. I know how hard it is to make judgment calls when obligations and honor are involved. Believe me, I get it. But deciding to be selfish every now and then does not make you a bad person."

"I'll feel like a bad person," she mumbled.

"You'll feel bad married," he countered. "Cami...you only get one life on Midgard. Is this how you want to spend it?"

She wouldn't meet his eyes, but he could tell she listened to him.

"Then what do I do? Leave?"

She didn't have a dragon to watch her back. She was tough, but she didn't want to be alone.

Hiccup shrugged. "I can't answer that. But I'd rather face regret over an action, than regret doing nothing at all."

He hopped on that dragon and left. He braved the world with nothing but a Night Fury and his journal at his side. Look where he was now.

Chatting up his friend-turned-belle.

Over the course of the night and a steady feeding of alcohol, Hiccup's mind lost the ability to avoid certain wanderings, until some could be considered inappropriate in the face of her plight. Through a hard swallow, Hiccup finally admitted to himself that he found Camicazi attractive. He found other women attractive before as well, but not to the point where he had almost no self-control over the focus of his thoughts. It wasn't normal to feel so hyperaware of someone.

He reckoned it could have been because of their history that his brain seemed so morbidly fascinated with her physical changes in the first place. It was like...suddenly having an upgraded weapon model presented to him. A horrible analogy, but it was the best reasoning he could come up with after four mugs of ale.

"Yeah, I guess..." Camicazi continued to speak indistinctly, not seeming all that convinced. Her face had pinkened, and Hiccup was sure the alcohol finally started to take a toll on her. "Ya' know, everything started changing once you left."

"Oh, here we go..." Hiccup dropped his hand from her shoulder, returning his double-palmed hold to his mug.

"I'm serious! You were gone, your dad freaked out, the dragons freaked out, the next think I know, I'm told I get the honor of creating the first, tangible alliance with Berk."

"I didn't start this!" Hiccup snapped, waving his hand towards whatever directed he decided North would be in that moment. "It started centuries before..." He took a breath, forcing calm over himself. "But, I'll end it."

As the words slipped from his mouth, his memory brought forth the flash of a cape and a parting. 'I won't apologize. But I will take responsibility.'
"What do you mean?"

Hiccup refocused on the girl besides him and realized he hadn't exactly told her his plan to deal with the demon. He mentioned Framherja, neglecting to mention the godly portion, and she scoffed when he told her the weapon only shot "special" arrows. But she believed him when he said he had gotten exceptionally good with archery.

Maybe clueing her into more of his agenda would help set things right with however she managed to skew her situation as his fault.

"Why do you think I'm back up here? I mean, I didn't know about how bad things have gotten, but I was planning on taking a stab at fixing this situation. Toothless can get me to the demon and—"

"Wait—wait! Hold up!" she held a hand up, flat palmed and closer to his face than he was comfortable with. "You're going to find the demon that controls dragons...on a dragon?"

"Toothless will be fine," Hiccup insisted. "As long as I'm with him, I won't let him go mad. Besides, we're just going to scope things about a bit. Then we'll take a stab at trying to kill it."

Her brow rose, and she looked faint. "Just you? Just you and a little Night Fury—which, by the way, is much smaller than I thought, he'd be so—"

Hiccup felt insulted on Toothless' behalf. "Hey! Toothless is fast. As long as we're vigilant, we won't get caught."

A bit of a white lie, but she needn't know that.

Camicazi breathed heavily through her nose, her jaw clenching in that tell tale sign of anger.

"Do you think that makes me feel better?"

"Well this has to stop doesn't it? It has to end!"

"Just the two of you? You and your little bow? Have you gone mad?"

"We're the only ones who can, who know. We're definitely the only ones willing to work together to get the job done, because, from what I've gathered, humans alone can't defeat it, and neither can dragons."

Her head shook. She didn't want to hear this.

"No. You're going to get yourself killed. No."

"Odin," Hiccup hissed. "I thought you'd be pleased. I'm doing something to try and fix this. If I succeed, maybe you won't have to marry Snotlout!"

"You thought...I'd be pleased?" She didn't sound pleased. Not in the least. "Pleased that you and Toothless are just going to...confront this monster?" Hiccup swore he saw the tightness in her jaw slacken just enough for her lip to tremble. "Great. Perfect. I'll be married to a guy who still refers to my breasts as "jugs" and you'll be dead. And then we'll all be dead soon after. Oh, I can't wait for this to play out!"

The sarcasm and anger saturating her words couldn't cover the lack of control over her features, which continued to reveal more and more grief as she went on. Hiccup pressed his brows together, unable to find the words to soothe her.
He reached up to touch her shoulder again. "I'm sorry."

She jerked out of his grasp.

"I don't care if you're sorry! This is just one, big, Hel-bound situation. There is no happy ending for anyone."

Hiccup leaned closer, wanting to placate her, to lower her voice, to bring back the perpetually happy girl who usually cheered him up.

"I'm sorry."

"I don't care," she repeated, but this time she didn't scoot away from him. To Hiccup's horror, her voice wavered through her anger, and the thinning of her eyes shifted into borderline anguish. "I can't believe you. I—I just—you're going to die! You don't even understand what it's like up there! You've been—been gallivanting around the world, without a care, and you're just going to come back and—and—"

"I'm sorry..." His voice dropped. He drew closer, cupping her face in his hands, feeling her jaw working through her complaints. "I'm sorry—I'm—"

"I don't care—!

Hiccup wasn't going to repeat himself, and Camicazi soon found she wasn't going to continue to try and place blame on him, because suddenly his mouth was on hers and her stomach was somewhere high in her throat, like she had suddenly been dropped and half her body hadn't realized it yet. And this time it wasn't the unexpected, fast motion that dazed her brain out of sheer audacity. This time, she saw him move in with time to spare; saw the way his eyes lowered to her lips just after he reached for her face. This time, she expected it, and, this time, she actually acknowledged the feel of Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third's lips on hers as he lingered against her mouth.

This time, he was kissing her. Really kissing her. He wasn't pulling away and neither was she and she could feel his ale-moistened lips slide along hers, and the tip of his nose against her cheek, warm breath to tickle the top of her lip.

An indeterminate moment passed, before his kiss loosened enough for her to mumble, "You gotta stop that."

He drew away, and it took the loss of that pressing sensation to realize her eyelids had lowered shut. Her lashes fluttered opened to find Hiccup's eyes still closed, his bottom lip caught between his teeth.

"I'm sorry," he murmured for the umpteenth time. Only then did he look at her, ashamed and genuinely apologetic for his actions, those of today and of the past.

Camicazi decided right then and there that an apology wasn't what she wanted from him, after all.

"I'm not," she whispered deftly, and she moved forward to continue what he started before he could fully settle back in his.

A piece of Hiccup's mind screamed at him for accepting her so readily into his arms. This was Camicazi. This was not a woman who could hardly communicate with him and this was not an intangible girl from his dreams. This was someone who occupied his first memories, someone who he bathed with in their first Laugardagur, spent summer months with building mud houses for fairies. She was the Viking who could snitch the horns off a helmet and have the wearer none the wiser; she was the Viking who could best a swordsman three times her size with a wild smile on her face and
insults to cow a sailor. Never did he think of her as a girl and all that applied to girls. Through all the parental jokes of betrothals between the tribes, and the teasing of his peers for having her sleep in his house during her visits, not once did he actually believe Camicazi was an option for female companionship.

And yet, here he was, kissing this vixen that had possessed the body of his childhood friend. Maybe it was the difference in her behavior, coupled with her more developed physique, which suddenly made her a viable choice. And maybe it was the absolute taboo of what they were doing, that made her taste so good. This felt so...off. Immoral. Off-limits. Right and wrong warred with every sensual contact between their bodies and that conflict somehow made it better.

Maybe being told he couldn't have her made him want her all the more.

Hiccup knew he should have felt ashamed for entertaining such thoughts, but feeling he could screw everything up with this compulsion kept his heart beating, and his lips moving, and his hands roaming. It was the hazard of destroying his oldest, human-linked friendship in a moment of pride and impulse that made this so good. It was the danger. Like flying.

Nothing felt rewarding if there wasn't risk involved.

And she was meant to marry Snotlout. Snotlout, who was always closer to Astrid than he could ever hope to be, who Astrid would talk to. Snotlout, who was always the better Viking, the son his father wished for. Snotlout, who was going to take over the chieftainship that Hiccup could never measure up enough for...

The bitter, possessive thoughts that suddenly took over his suppressed brain activity felt like a kick to the ribs. Oh gods, what was he doing?

Hiccup pulled back with a faint, wettish pop, keeping a hand firmly on Camicazi's shoulder to prevent any kiss-initiation on her part.

"Stop," he commanded gruffly. "No. We don't want this."

He hated how he sounded like he was trying to convince himself.

Camicazi's shock at being rebuffed quickly fell into a morose countenance, and she snatched her drink from the table, taking a heavy gulp.

"Maybe I want this."

"No, you don't." Still not sounding confident.

"Yes, I do." But her eyes weren't meeting his.

Shit, Hiccup thought. He really buggered this up. He knew he should have stopped before. Kissing her would only make things uncomfortable. He was attracted to her, yes, but she was still Camicazi underneath it all—still the same girl despite the new reservations, distress, and burdens—and that meant they couldn't possibly manage relations while sustaining their longstanding, platonic ties.

Right?

"You look good," Camicazi suddenly mentioned, as if speaking aloud an earlier afterthought. "I know I didn't say it to you when I first saw you, but it's what I was thinking."

"You were thinking of kicking my ass," Hiccup pointed out, willing to embrace the chance for
somewhat normal conversation.

"Right. That too," she smiled at him, but he could see the candlelight reflect too harshly in her eyes. She was still upset. "But I also thought you looked good. Your hair, and all. Outlawry suits you."

He gave a half-cocked grin. "Thanks. I thought so myself."

She laughed, abrupt, and chewed on her bottom lip thoughtfully.

Perfect. Now he was looking at her lips, and she was looking at his. He knew this because he tried to look at her eyes, only to find them darkened with want.

Something broke inside him.

He didn't care if she was going to marry Snotlout or what kind of man this made him.

"You really want this?"

"Yeah," she laughed again, hollow, like she couldn't believe it herself. "I really, honestly want this."

She turned from him then, and took another gulp of her ale, her fourth fill by his measurements. Still keeping up with him. Frowning, Hiccup reached for the cup and pulled it away.

"Hey—" she started to protest, but Hiccup grabbed the slim hand that tried to retain her glass, and wrapped his fingers around it. She stared at the difference in size and complexion before moving her faltering line of sight back to him.

"If you really want this, this...then I want you to remember this...me..."

He didn't know where this confidence came from, or these words. Natural pride spurred by alcohol, perhaps. The challenge of making her cry his name at least once, in a volume he had yet to discover. Or, maybe the thought of Snotlout marrying her, doing what he was about to do, bothered him more than he was willing to admit. He wanted her first; he wanted her to understand what he was capable of...

He didn't want to lose his friend to them—not to the Vikings, not to his former tribe. He didn't want her to become the fat, bitter wife she feared was in her future, never knowing him as anything more than Hiccup the Useless, Hiccup the Outlawed. He would not be forgotten.

"Wow," she mumbled, staring hard at his lips again with those dark, nebulous eyes that made his stomach clench. "Look, at you...taking command..."

She didn't stop him when he brought his hand up to cup the back of her neck, tilting her face towards his in a willing invitation. His mouth hovered over hers, the finest threads of restraint snapping one by one.

"By Thor, we're actually doing this," she whispered against his open mouth, the skin of their lips grazing with the gentle motions.

Their lips just barely caught each other when something in Camicazi's words pulled at Hiccup logic, and, for the second time, he found a more, reserved part of himself vying for his attention.

He slowly drew away, like a fog clearing from an early, morning port.

"Yeah, yeah...you're right. It's weird. And besides, you—"
She grabbed his head, forcing on him a bruising, nearly painful, kiss.

"Shut up," the Burglar hissed through their mashed lips. Hiccup was taken aback by the strength in which she responded to his questioning. This wasn't pure desire that drove her to him; there was desperation as well.

His mind wasn't working at full speed. He wanted to continue to work over all the reasons this shouldn't happen, the immoral and shameful feelings behind their actions, but his self-control was slipping. He couldn't fight this any more, not when Camicazi—unexpectedly beautiful and untouchable—threw her self at him, smelling of ale, the ocean and something forbidden.

Hiccup firmly slowed her display of dominance almost as soon as it began, drawing her into his tempo, easing, warming her into this intimate kiss she'd likely never experienced in all her exploits. He didn't know how many men Camicazi had been with, but his quick take-over of method told him kissing had never been a focal point for her. He was in control this time, and knowing that only fueled the confidence she brought out in him.

He was the first to best Camicazi in a duel of this sort.

His hands travelled the length of her sides—a slightly awkward endeavor given their seating, but completely manageable after a number of drinks and a lust-induced fog. He tested the firmness that Doris lacked and found it just as desirable. Camicazi was a girl—a woman—of action. She had scars, no doubt, and blemished skin that stretched over compact muscle, and it defined her. It reminded him of who this was and how she found the thought less and less twisted. His squeezed one of the hips—hips he never could have imagined would find their way onto her body—and she sighed, sagging into his frame even more, the harsh grip of her hands subsiding. She began to trail her fingers through his hair and across the back of his neck in time to his own hand movements.

"Oi! This here's a public establishment, it is!"

They broke apart at the barman's incensed cry, unmistakably directed at them. Up until that point Hiccup thought they managed to be pretty discrete—when Camicazi wasn't shouting at him, that is—but the owner's yell spurred an uprising of hoots and cheers from the drunken patrons.

"Keep it going!" someone yelled from the back, and Hiccup felt an overwhelming urge to bury his face in his arms. He wondered how much English Camicazi knew when she only grinned wider upon hearing the shout.

While he loved seeing her back to her old self, did it have to be at his expense?

"These Northerners are kinks!" another called out, flustering Hiccup further.

And, then, a familiar pair of voices—

"Wot's he got, that I don't?"

"Working yarbles, for one thing."

"Git!"

Apparently, Camicazi did know English, because she smiled broadly at the angered Saxon behind the bar.

"Giff ahs room! On house—or ve sex on dable here!"
She slapped the wood, shocking the liquid left in their drinks.

This, of course, received even more roars of approval from the already rowdy tavern.

All of Hiccup's manly confidence evaporated and his cry of "What!" coincided with the barman's. He dearly hoped his was the lower pitched one.

"Are you nuts?" he hissed. "What are you doing? What room? This isn't a damn brothel!"

"This is an island," she muttered from the side of her mouth. "They're just separated enough from the nearest Lord to get away with it. Why do you think there's an upstairs?"

Bewildered, Hiccup glanced around the murky alehouse until he spotted the bottom steps of a stairwell just visible in the poor lighting. The architecture and crowd had hidden it well.

Funny, how Camicazi noticed it right away.

The owner seemed just as shocked as Hiccup, though probably more at Camicazi's stipulations, and growled, "What kind o' business ya' think I'm runnin' here, ya' bint!"

"Fine," Camicazi pouted like the prospect of exhibitionism actually sounded appealing to her. "On him, zen."

"I bought the drinks!" Hiccup squawked, indignation written all over his face.

Ignoring him, Camicazi handed the still-glowering man a couple silver pieces. For a moment, Hiccup thought he actually won his point...until he padded his side and felt a missing knot in his belt.

"Hey!"

The blonde grabbed his hand and lugged him through the applauding crowd and up the stairs. Hiccup was so bewildered at the force she exhibited that he hardly remembered to feel embarrassed.

It was dark, and they stumbled up the indistinguishable steps. Camicazi seemed to know where she was going, and Hiccup inanely wondered if all such places were designed the same.

The sobering walk, and seeing her pick a door (one that, no doubt, led to a bed) cleared his head enough for the questions to re-emerge.

"Cami," he called, just stopping her from entering the room. "This...we should...I shouldn't of..."

He could feel her finger pressed against his lip, silencing his half-cocked excuses. Only her face was caught in the window light of the hall, the usually tanned skin shining white in the moon, and her eyes clearer than he anticipated. It was more than moonlight he caught reflected back at him; he saw need. She was begging him not to question this, to let it happen, for her. She was desperate for this.

There was something about the way she kissed him earlier that carried the barest hints of remembrance, and it just occurred to him what it was. Destitution. She wanted to forget. She wanted to pretend.

This was another escape. He was an escape. He was Doris' escape, and he was about to become Camicazi's. And it was ironic, because escaping was his specialty: his vice and his weakness. He was fleeting, in and out of people's lives, forgettable to some, memorable to others, but he would never stay. He couldn't bring himself to.

He was being used, and he deserved it.
Her hands were upon his face, palms rubbing along the stubble-roughed skin with a wonder of their own.

"Just keep kissing me like that," she told him in that sensual, potent combination of demand and plea. And, because he knew how wrong it was, he did. 

He would not be forgotten.

No window cast light into the room. The candle at the bedside had burned out forever ago. There wasn't much to the light stick to begin with, probably used countless times before them, and only a cold, hardened mess of wax lumped over the table remained. She thought the familiar scene would help her do this, help pretend Hiccup was just another man she found attractive...

And then chicken out at the last minute and gulp down some common rue.

But he was different—of course he was, he always had to be—and she couldn't forget him because he wasn't forgettable to begin with. He treated her with familiarity, and perhaps he had an unfair advantage over former relations, but it added an intimacy she never felt before.

Never take to bed a man with which you are too familiar

Camicazi wanted to look over at him, to see his profile one last time in whatever light her eyes could collect in the unlit setting, but that would only make this more punishing. She had to keep pretending this was someone else.

When seeking a partner, always have one objective eye

She breathed deeply, smelling him and her and the overall fustiness of the room, steeling herself for the hardest part of the night. She still had to leave.

She was a Bog Burglar; it was part of their code. Never lead a man on. Always be open with your intentions. Avoid giving them the opportunity to convince you otherwise. Disappear before they can stop you.

This was mostly for the younger women—standards to live by to keep them on the right track. As a Burglar aged it became less and less likely for whimsical feelings to carry her away. Occasionally, one would be tempted into marriage, but Camicazi wasn't one of those. She couldn't be.

The cracks in the shoddy ceiling told her it was still night, and the soundless atmosphere beyond the walls and below told her the patrons left long ago. It was the perfect time.

With practiced movements, Camicazi slowly eased herself away from the body beside her, pulling the rough sheets back as silently as possible.

She swore she didn't jostle the bed or disturb him in the slightest; her movements were too smooth. So feeling those strong fingers suddenly tighten around her wrist startled her into a light gasp.

"Stay."

She couldn't make anything out in the dark, but he sounded barely conscious with his sleep-
roughened voice, and she would bet her bronze dirk that his eyes were closed.

She tried to pull away, halfhearted in her attempts because the sound of his voice felt like chains had been thrown on her.

"I have to," she whispered. "I need to..."

"Stay," he repeated, stronger, but no less sleep-bungled. "I promise, you'll be the first to leave."

And he tugged her hard enough to win against her quickly crumbling reluctance.

The bed was crap, and the material reeked of their activity, but somehow the warmth within it seemed more inviting than she'd ever expect. The fact that he understood her so well, her needs and her whims, enticed her back to his side.

*Never kiss*

She had already broken too many rules that night.

*He can touch you with his lips anywhere but your own*

What was one more?

Camicazi lowered herself back to the mattress, settling beneath the covers. She allowed Hiccup to draw her close to his body, their knees overlapping. Now so near to him, she could see that his eyes *were* closed, and wondered if he were even aware of the hand she felt roaming over the skin above her hip.

For the first time, Camicazi didn't mind having a man's hands on her for anything other than carnal pleasure. She wasn't being carried away, she was just...delaying the inevitable. *This was Hiccup, after all. They caused trouble when they were together all the time.*

This was simply trouble of a different sort.

Maybe, just this once, she would stay until morning. Hiccup understood what she was, *who* she was. He didn't expect anything from her, except, perhaps, her forgiveness.

She pressed her forehead against his collarbone and breathed in his scent. Tonight, she would pretend. She would pretend she wasn't a Bog Burglar, and she would pretend this was a world where Hiccup hadn't left. *A possible future that eluded them long ago.*

Come morning, Hiccup would not remember the brief exchange.
Ricket is a bread-making Viking's daughter. Apparently, he's not a very good bread maker if Hiccup thought the village could use another one, but it's his occupation nonetheless.

*I apologize for all the inner monologuing. I was aiming for some weird mix of awkward and desire. That step beyond friends is always a tricky one, especially when you know you can't actually have a relationship.

** Reminder that Hiccup and Camicazi are seventeen, so logic and reason and general fear of consequences are going to be obliterated by hormones. Also: consenting adults
Hiccup found Gudrid's simple prettiness very appealing, and Doris downright beautiful, but as he watched the dense, blonde strands of Camicazi's scrupulously mussed mane swing over her back as she searched for her clothes, Hiccup realized his hair preference.

He lifted himself on his elbows, admiring her toned figure padding around the room in muted footfalls—so different from what he experienced in Miklagard, yet more womanly than he'd ever imagine associating with the girl.

The dark marks inked into her skin stood out in the lightened room. Across her lower back, her arms, her shoulder blades, one peaking out from behind her neck... Hiccup wouldn't be surprised if she documented every land she visited on her body.

"You had less tattoos than I expected," he noted aloud. His sleep-roughened voice alerted her to his wakefulness.

She didn't react in alarm. She straightened from her hunch, heedless to her nudity, and glanced over her shoulder with a cheeky grin.

"You had more scars," she countered, and she was honestly surprised by the outstanding textures she felt on his skin. The mess on his neck she noticed the night before—an unusual pattern whose origin she could only guess at. With the vambraces removed she could now see the discoloration all over his forearms—forge work and sparring, she'd expect.

But there was something on his back that really caught her attention. Something she continually felt throughout the night; her fingers, with a mind of their own, traced the edges of slick and soft in a mesmerizing pattern. Something that large had to have a story behind it. It didn't feel accidental.

She couldn't bring herself to ask to see it, not now when she could barely string a handful of words to mind in light of their actions, let alone a tactful way of leading up to the subject. She only hoped it had been shallow. She couldn't imagine the recovery from anything deeper.

"They're worth it," Hiccup shrugged. He may have felt just as nervous and insecure as she, but managed the same comfortable exterior to soften the atmosphere.

Camicazi eyed him for a moment, noting the length of his hair out of its tie, falling along his shoulders and nearly as messy as her own. With more light escaping into the room from the poorly constructed walls, the Burglar heiress could fully appreciate how well he had grown. Nothing like she'd expected, and yet, still obviously _Hiccup_.

She rocked from her line of thoughts, not wanting him to catch her staring. Not while she was standing, stark naked, as he lay covered.

"By the way, I'm taking your tunic," Camicazi informed him as she snatched the dark shirt from the ground and quickly threw it over her head. She didn't see him sit up straighter in alarm, but she did hear his chagrined objection.

"Why? You already took my money!"

He'd gotten the bag back—a fair bit lighter than it should have been.

Camicazi, now draped in the oversized garment, picked up the sad remains of her wrap, not needing words to accompany the dry look she sent him but providing them nonetheless.

"I'm flattered at your desperation to touch my breasts, but was it necessary to bring weapons into this?"

His protest withered from his tongue as he looked upon the frayed edges of the cloth and he found himself conceding to her case. He made no further effort to stop her from stealing his clothes.

Hiccup expected to have driven that queer, possessive streak out of his system the night before, but there was something about seeing her in his tunic—the way it nearly dwarfed her petite body—that stirred something feral within.

"So I guess I'm not getting any morning sex?" he semi-joked, as a part of him actually wanted to go again. His voice still sounded gritty and he had no impulse to clear his throat.

Camicazi, who had been shimmying into her leggings, cast him a sly smile.

"Morning sex? You do that?"

"When the occasion calls for it. You don't, apparently."

"You're the first I've stayed until morning with," she pointed out. She cringed almost as soon as the words left her mouth. She heard the explanation as a man with morals would, understanding the sort of woman they painted her as.

Hiccup didn't seem the least bit put off by it, and her anxiety vanished as suddenly as it came. She remembered that this was a man who knew of her customs—the very reason why she stayed in the first place.

"I'm honored," Hiccup returned, in a voice ambiguous to sarcasm.

Camicazi wouldn't waste a moment assembling a second meaning to his response. She went back to clothes hunting, snagging her belt off a ceiling rafter, occupying her mind with scenarios to explain how it ended there in the first place, rather than the slowly clearing eyes that sized her up.

"Stop staring," she griped after a moment too long of scrutiny. She wouldn't feel embarrassed—she had nothing to be embarrassed about! But, if there were any guy she would feel self-conscious before, it would be the one who had her in his sights after the night they just shared.

"Hey..." Hiccup caught her attention with the softly voiced word. That comfortable exterior she thought they both excelled at slipped as he hooked his lip between his teeth. "Let's...let's not let things get weird, okay?"
Camicazi finished fastening her belt with an arch smile.

"Oh. I agree. We're simply getting up to our old shenanigans." She moved towards him—slow, her hips leaving subtle shifts in the fabric of his tunic. "...just in a more adult fashion..."

She reached the bed, and continued to talk as she crawled over the covers, over his lap. "Think about it...if you had stayed, and nothing changed in this dragon situation...this probably would have happened anyway..."

She reached his mouth, her face a breath away from his own, a knee on either side of his hips. Her hands slid up his chest, running through the sparse hair, over the bones of his shoulders and rounding his back. Her fingers touched that scar again. She could ask about it now...but it seemed such a mood killer, especially when she had his lips right there and her memory sent forth snippets of the sensations they could bring about.

"No," Hiccup spoke, suddenly. Perhaps the touching of an old wound spurred the sound from him, but he made no move to escape her. "It would have never turned into...this..."

She kissed him, short and tasting, helping to concrete those memories she feared would be all she'd have left of him in a few weeks.

"I disagree," she breathed out. Her lips caught his again, continuing in intervals, "I don't think we would have been able to keep things simple...it makes sense that we would end up...attracted to each other."

Hiccup was the first to draw away enough to look her in the eye, "I wouldn't... be like this, had I stayed."

"Oh, you don't know that."

"I do know that, actually."

"No, you don't."

"No, actually, I do."

She grabbed both his cheek and planted another firm, hard kiss on his mouth.

"No, you don't."

Hiccup gave her a deep, earthy chuckle. Suddenly, he wasn't naked, Camicazi wasn't straddling his waist, and her natural scent didn't immediately make him think of sex. They were just two, old friends in a harmless disagreement.

"Do you feel better?" he asked, thinking back to what started this all.

"Much."

She nipped at his lips one last time before sashaying off the bed.

Hiccup couldn't get the smile off his face.

"You really like the kissing," he noted.

"I've never been with a guy who kissed as much." Apart from the fact that she never gave them the opportunity to begin with, she doubted she would find anyone quite like Hiccup.
"You liked it," he repeated.

And apparently he knew this.

A day ago she would have found this repeated display of confidence out-of-character for him. A day ago she still pictured the nervous, scrawny boy she stumbled upon in the Orkneys.

"I did." She found the last of her effects but she stared at the ground a moment longer, unwilling to look him in the eye for her admission.

"Well, what you did with your mouth last night is considered taboo by the Greeks."

Camicazi had to bite her lip to keep from smiling too hard, sending him the third impish glance of the morning as her fingers padded against her sides to absently count her belongings.

"So it was a Greek woman who broke you in?"

Hiccup pursed his lips, his expression deadpan. "I'm not a horse."

She laughed, backing towards the door, but when she reached it she realized she didn't know how to say goodbye. How did she leave in broad daylight? Leave while burdened by the awareness of her partner, and the precarious standing of their relationship?

"Hey, do me a favor and don't get yourself killed," she decided on the honest request. "Not before I make it up there to save you."

His expression softened into tenderness, better matching to his childhood mien. "My aim is to have everything all sorted out before any saving is necessary."

"Race you there."

"I'm riding a Night Fury," he reminded her. "I'll win."

_Oh crap. Toothless._

Hiccup suddenly found his braises thrown into his face. He ripped the undergarment off in time to see the door closing, no Burglar in sight.

Left with nothing but solitude and messy sheets, Hiccup allowed the smile to slide from his face. He flopped back onto the flat pillow with a heavy exhalation.

_What had he done?_

"You... did more than get drinks:"
"Sorry," Hiccup yawned, completely unabashed. He scratched at the side of his face and headed straight for his bags.

Toothless remained where he way, stretched along the rocks, and followed his human's movements with sharp eyes.

::Where are your clothes?::

Hiccup made a noise that sounded like "umph".

::Was there primary? Did you fight her?::

"Only verbally."

::It's a start:: Toothless sighed. ::And you should know I ate the rest of that seal. That's what you get for lying to me::

Hiccup listened with half an ear, yanking from his pack what he hoped was his spare tunic.

A numbing sensation had taken a hold of him. Being away from Camicazi and near Toothless, the walk away from the tavern, being back in the campsite...it all served to clear much of his inner mayhem over his, arguably, poor decision-making skills. He was thinking with his head again, and not about what he did, but why he did it. What Camicazi told him...what she had to do, what his father had to do, and why...

"Things are really bad up there," he mumbled. How had the situation fallen so quickly in their absence? It still seemed surreal to Hiccup. Not to discredit Camicazi but this was something he needed to see for himself—the sooner, the better.

::Seems that way, doesn't it?::

"We took our time..."

::We took necessary time:: Toothless reminded him.

Hiccup nodded. He was a mess back then. As was Toothless—more than either of them realized. It was easy to bemoan the decision to act on their whims now—now that he had more facts, more insight to what went on in their absence. But attempting to rectify anything with his and Toothless' individual insecurities could have been disastrous. They could have thrown away both of their worlds' fighting chance to defeat this demon.

At the very least, Hiccup had to open a few more people's eyes to the benefits of uniting dragons and humans in this war. He needed to spread awareness to the truth behind this war and reveal the common enemy.

"Well, I feel...confident enough. Yeah, I do. Yes. Right. No more dilly-dallying. Not if things are that bad," Hiccup affirmed with more resolution than he had ever felt about the matter.

Toothless beat his tail on the ground. ::Right::

Hiccup wormed his way into his only spare tunic—dark green and low-necked. "We'll get up there, we'll assess the situation first-hand—we'll check out the nest for sure. I'll find a way to communicate with Berk...hopefully, da—ah—Stoick will have calmed down some."

Trying to get into communication with Berk frightened Hiccup more than the thought of infiltrating
the demon's nest. Part of it had to do with only knowing the demon through word of mouth, where as he'd seen his father's temper first hand on many occasions. He knew how stubborn the man could be, and experience had taught him that no one could hold a grudge quite like a Viking.

On the other hand, if the situation were as bad as Camicazi implied, then maybe it could work to his advantage.

In a perfect world, he would be back in Berk's good graces, with a father who understood his need for the skies, and a general acceptance of his dragon-riding habits. Sometimes it was fun to entertain such thoughts, and other times it depressed him. Because a perfect world did not, and would never, exist.

That's why he would only aim for Berk's cooperation, something that could help them in the long run. Desperation and the allotted time to cool off were Hiccup's main helping factors, and he rated the endeavor as 'possibly attainable'.

Provided they never find out that he—oh, Freya's shapely legs! He just slept with the future wife of the future chieftain, hadn't he?

A soft, scarcely audible moan escaped Hiccup's lips.

No. Berk mustn't ever find out about that.

::Allies would help. I'd hate to think we'd have the fate of both our worlds solely on our shoulders::

It took a moment for Hiccup to backtrack to what they were discussing, and resolutely shook from his head thoughts of betrayal.

"Yeah... yeah," he said. "We'll try to knock a few out of that zone like I did with you, see if we can't get some help from the dragon's side as well."

::Provided I don't lose my mind in the process::

The human gave his dragon a large, toothy grin and thumped his chest with his fist.

"You'll be fine—I'll protect you!"

::Ea, help me::: Toothless muttered.

Hiccup fumbled with the ties of his belt, attaching his dagger and sabre. He paused when he weighed the saggy money pouch against his palm, releasing a forlorn sigh. He had others, but he couldn't help but feel for the loss. He liked his money. Both, earned and stolen.

As Hiccup rooted through his bag for another money sack, the back of his hands brushing against familiar textiles, something hit him as off—like he should have realized something by now.

"No...oh no...no, no..."

His movements became frantic as he began tossing objects from the pack left and right, feeling valuable after valuable, but never the right one. Finally, Hiccup's hands went to his hair, gripping the loose strands by the fistful.

"Augh!"

Toothless laid his earfins back, not understanding this sudden change of behavior.
"What?"

"The—that—she—she took the rubies!"

The dragon's earfins fell further, now out of cynicism rather than concern.

"The tiny red rocks?"

"When did she do it?" Hiccup whispered to himself. "It couldn't have been...no...I thought I was watching her...then again, it was getting dark..."

Knowing her, all it would have taken was one moment of facing Toothless, one moment where his eyes weren't following her. That was Camicazi's magic. She could have you guessing at how she cheated you for eternity.

"Damn it!" Hiccup threw the bag to the ground, his head oscillating from side-to-side, fruitlessly searching the area for any clue as to where else the rubies could be. He knew she took them; he knew her第六 sense could have never kept them secret from her.

Toothless did not share his human's concern for the gems, and made no motion to help when Hiccup, in rough, ireful movements, repack all of his belongings.

"Why do you even keep those things? They're the first thing people try to take from you:"

"I like them!" the human flared. He knew he wouldn't offend Toothless with his waspish behavior because Toothless thought this whole thing was funny.

Indeed, the dragon did little more than look on with a flat expression as Hiccup moved like a whirlwind around the shortly occupied camp. He started retying his pants, then he threw the saddle on Toothless, then he struggled to fit his belt on correctly, then he began. He was rough in handling everything, grumbling under his breath all the while.

Why couldn't she have gone after Framherja? She would have gotten a nasty shock and it would have, hopefully, dissuaded any further attempts at robbing him.

"It's still light out:" Toothless mentioned. Though, as long as they stayed out to sea, they needn't worry too much about attackers.

"They can't be far," Hiccup bit out. "She barely has a head start."

It wouldn't be hard to spot their ship; Camicazi let slip that the Bogs were heading back north, and Cogs were less and less common as one approached Viking lands. Camicazi's great-grandmother brought many changes to their tribe—such as adopting the Northern Cog over the traditional knörr, and ending the practice of male infanticide. The former earned many scoffs from their Viking neighbors, the latter some sighs of relief.

"Come on," Hiccup growled, and Toothless felt the boy's weight settle heavily on his back.

"Shouldn't you calm down a little first?"

"I'm hoping to teach her a lesson before that happens." Hiccup at least knew himself well enough to know that once he was calm, summoning that initial spark of anger would be difficult. He went from rage to forgiveness far too easily.

Toothless' interest in the situation doubled.
"You're key."

"Don't suppose you're to tell me where you got that. Not really your size..."

Camicazi shrugged one shoulder at Brüna the Butch's inquiry, the loose collar of her new garment slipping further over the skin. She loved Brüna like an aunt, the woman was her mother's best friend and second-in-command, but Camicazi knew Brüna was stationed on this voyage to keep an eye on her, to assess her leadership capabilities, and then report back to Bertha.

Knowing that she could very well lose any chance of leading her tribe made it a bitter venture.

Camicazi accidentally took a large gulp of her tea, scalding the back of her tongue.

"You know, you're never to find men by yourself," Brüna went on. "Always, always—"

"—have a second when scoping a man," Camicazi finished, flippant. "I know, Brü, but I can take care of myself."

The older woman pursed her lips, planting her fists into her meaty hips.

"Heard that from plenty of girls before, and many stronger than your bony arse."

Camicazi took another sip. Brüna threw her hands into the air with an exasperated growl.

"Hel slap it into you!" She cursed and began a heavy pace across the groaning, wood planks. "You youngun's forget it a lot, but the menfolk tend to have a physical advantage over us. Particularly when you're outnumbered. I know you like to think you're invincible—"

"Wuuah!"

"—but you...got...to..."

Brüna turned at the sound of Camicazi's short cry and the clink of cup against wood. Her diatribe tapered as she stared at the mess of tea on the ship's deck, no Burglar in sight.

"Cami...?"

She knew he would be pissed. She knew he would figure it out eventually—that he would curse her name and probably try to hold a grudge. She had anticipated a retrieval attempt—the man had the means now—and had had foreseen a confrontation of sorts.

But Camicazi hadn't seen this coming. She hadn't seen much at all. One moment she listened to Brüna chew her out and the next she was in the air, a strong, almost painful, grip digging into her shoulders.
It took her a moment longer to figure out what happened—the wind loud in her ears, the cold stinging her skin, her new tunic secured only by her belt in the force of it all. Her ship, far, far below her...

Hiccup's voice broke through her quickly emerging horror.

"You would! Of course you would!"

Her head snapped up, only the large, dark belly of a dragon and the bare ends of a pedal visible to her. "Hiccup!"

"I should have known!" his disembodied voice went on, mocking and angry. "I really only have myself to blame—!"

"Hiccup!" she shrieked again, clutching wildly at the taloned hold to her arm. "Let me go!"

"Gladly!"

It could have been Toothless who shouted that for all she knew, because her capture promptly released thereafter, and she found herself falling a hundred fathoms to her death.

She wasn't aware of screaming. She had no idea for how long she fell. She could only focus on the water below and how fast she approached slapping the surface—a surface she knew wouldn't soften for her landing, not at this speed.

And then she was yanked to the side in a hard jerk, her leg snatched during her descent so that she was carried upside down.

It was dizzying and disorienting, and it took her yet another moment to register Hiccup's voice.

"I can't believe you!" he shouted down at her, completely unmindful to any terror she might be experiencing. The blood rushed to her head. She couldn't even think of looking for her ship, of figuring out how close to the water she now hurled. "What are you? A prostitute? Did you want to get paid?"

"I—you just had so much stuff! I didn't think you'd notice!"

"Oh—well, guess what? I noticed!"

A scream broke free from her throat as she was dropped—and eventually caught—again. The dragon threw her around like an otter did a frog moments before devouring it.

She could have thought this was fun...if her only security didn't consist of hard scales and sharp claws.

"Did you think you could run from me?" Hiccup called. A malice she never thought she'd hear in his voice embittered the question. And hurt. "I ride a Night Fury!"

She was swinging upside down and Camicazi didn't think she could endure the man—er, dragon—handling any longer. She had her hands over her face, unwilling to try and make sense of the constantly turning world. "Okay, okay! I'm sorry! I'll give it back!"

"Promise me!" he barked.

"I promise! Just...Hiccup, just bring me back!" she pleaded against the high winds. All the flipping brought on a nausea she'd rarely experienced.
She was tossed, one last time, and the dragon caught her on the inside of either elbow, forcing her hands from her face.

Sound and sight returned to her. She blinked her eyes rapidly, bringing her surroundings into focus. They were hovering over her ship, her entire crew now assembled on deck (no doubt attracted by her vocal objection), staring up at her in horror and amazement.

"Night Fury..." The title rippled through the gathering like the hush of a Haustmánuður breeze.

One by one, spears and swords raised, all pointy ends poised at the outcast pair. Hiccup bared little concern; he and Toothless were safe in the air. Plus, they had a hostage to keep from being attacked.

"Tell them to lower their weapons," he instructed his "hostage".

"Lower your weapons," Camicazi recited with surprisingly little struggle. "And get my bag! It's by the shrouds."

"Whit's goin' on!" Brüna hollered, but she ushered a smaller women at her side to do as Camicazi said.

"Just a minor disagreement," Camicazi assured her. She managed a rather convincing 'everything is just fine' voice, considering she hung in the air by the claws of a dragon.

"How you doing, buddy?" Hiccup murmured to Toothless. They were far more adapted to moving through the air, using the air currents and their own velocity to keep afloat. Maintaining a hover wasn't easy.

::I'm fine:: Toothless informed him. ::She hardly weighs a thing. You on the other hand... You need to lay off the seal::

Hiccup snorted.

"You just want more for yourself, glutton." He managed a small smile, his hand reaching up to pat his friend on the side of the head. The steady beat of the dragon's wings hadn't faltered once; they would last a moment longer.

The appointed sack-retrieving Burglar returned, shoving her way to the front of the crowd.

"Now whit?" she asked.

"Now we trade! This for that!" Hiccup gestured from Camicazi to small rucksack swinging in her hand.

No one moved. The women still stared at Hiccup as though he was Loki himself. The bag remained in the Burglar's possession.

"Toss it up," Camicazi ordered when it became obvious no one planned on listening to Hiccup (of which, she was secretly pleased). Her shoulders suffered from bearing most of her weight and she wanted down.

The woman shrugged, less unsure of the situation when given a direct order, and gave the bag an overhand throw that sailed neatly into Hiccup's awaiting arms. He burrowed into it without delay.

"It's in the grey cloth." Camicazi sounded bored, her hysteria lost with the settling of her stomach. Hiccup opened the only bundle of rags Camicazi could have referred to and found the pouch that
stored his rubies. All three were present and accounted for.

"We're good," he informed Toothless.

The claws released her, and Camicazi dropped to the deck of her ship, landing in a springy crouch. Immediately, her crew surrounded her, dozens of questions regarding her health and her situation whirled into one, indistinguishable moan.

"I'm fine! I'm fine!" she yelled over the din, brushing the thick and armored hands away from her.

"Oi!" someone piped up. "That's Stoick's boy, innit?"

Hiccup rolled his eyes, wondering if the connection just occurred to them in light of seeing a Night Fury or if they really didn't recognize him at first.

Fantastic. "Attack the pariah" was coming.

"Right, time to get out of here," Hiccup said under his breath so only Toothless could hear.

But before Hiccup could spin the dragon in another direction, before the Burglars' slow, angry mumbles of realization could be worked into an uproar, Camicazi spoke up.

"Leave him alone. Him and the dragon. Get back to the rigging! You all have jobs to do!"

"But miss—!"

"Surely, you don't—"

"That wasn't a request!"

The women obeyed, but their reluctance was made known by the grumbling and slow dispersing. Most kept their hands by their weapons and lingered, curiosity keeping them from their designated tasks. Soon, only Brüna remained, and just as her feet refused to leave the young blonde's side, her eyes refused to move from the boy atop the dragon. Had their Lady not just been kidnapped, she would have actually been impressed with the sight of a human riding a Night Fury.

"You can leave too," Camicazi dismissed Brüna.

"I ain't leaving."

"Brü—"

"I ain't leaving."

Brüna leveled a hard stare at her captain that conveyed her thoughts about leaving Camicazi alone with the dragon rider. The blonde pitched a long-suffering sigh, deciding to let the woman do as she pleased so long as she didn't raise a weapon to the boys.

She turned her attention to the still-hovering man, and made a futile attempt at taming her windswept hair.

"That was good," she congratulated him. "No, really, I didn't see that coming. I don't think I even want to get back at you."

Hiccup's eyebrows rose, and some of that righteous anger returned to his harden his features. "Get back at me? You stole from me!"
A ghastly conclusion then overcame Brüna as bits and pieces of that peculiar morning fell into place.

The tunic. The steal.

She rubbed a hand over her slack face.

"Oh, child, no..."

Camicazi ignored her, pointing a finger at Hiccup; her eyes narrowed over her already flushed cheeks. "You put me in a shitty situation!"

"What! That didn't even make sense!" Hiccup countered. "You made that whole thing in your head. I had nothing to do with it!

"You left—"

"We've been over this! I'm not apologizing again—"

"I'll keep saying it until you acknowledge that what you did was wrong!"

"It wasn't wrong for me!"

"This isn't about you!"

"Then stop saying it's my fault!"

"You have to accept some of the blame!"

Hiccup snarled, fists clenching against his thighs, unable to find the words to make her realize how unreasonable she was being.

None of the Bog Burglars seemed inclined to butt into their "conversation". Their heads volleyed back and forth to each speaker as a single unit.

Hiccup didn't want to be some showcase. He didn't want to force Toothless to hover any longer, and he didn't want to deal with that... that thieving...

Well, he got what he came for.

"Let's go," he spit out, leaning back in the saddle to subtly clue Toothless into the direction they should head in.

Toothless ceased flapping his wings, and landed on the deck of the boat, too close to the large woman standing besides Camicazi for Hiccup to feel comfortable with. Alarm set in on all sides.

"What are you doing?" he cried, and he didn't care if it was too loud or made him look too scared. The women were approaching again. Oh gods, the weapons were coming out.

::You don't want to leave like this::


More weapons raised; the women were wary, conflicted by the instinct to attack and the orders from their leader not to.

::This was the girl who was your only friend for a long time, right?::
Hiccup took his eyes off the congregating warriors to stare at the back of Toothless' head.

"What? Why does that even matter? We need to get out of here!"

He planned on getting his treasure back, teaching Camicazi a lesson, and then leaving. Castration via harpies was not in his schedule, and Hiccup had no illusions as to how he would be received after publicly tormenting their captain.

::You said she was an old friend. It's the same one you told me about, isn't it? The girl from the other nest::

He may have mentioned it after he encountered the Bog Burglars in the Orkneys. A lifetime ago. He hadn't given Toothless the entire situation between him and Camicazi, not their history or the sheer repercussions of what they did that night. That was stuff he could lay down on the dragon while they were safe, in the air. He planned on reasoning out that whole night with his best friend—never would he expect sympathy from Toothless, but a different perspective at least.

A woman came a little too close for comfort, and Hiccup's foot unconsciously kicked in the stirrup. The moving tailfin was useless without Toothless' cooperation.

"Tooth, com'n let's go!" he pleaded. Did the dragon not understand the situation they were in?

"Weapons down!" Camicazi barked, startling Hiccup's attention back to her. "No one is to attack them! Anyone who does will be keelhauling all the way back to Hjaltland!"

The Bog Burglars looked at her as though she were mad, but complied.

"Camicazi," one of the rounder women began, "these are..."

"They won't harm you as long as none comes to them." Camicazi leveled a significant look at Hiccup. "Right?"

"Right," Hiccup muttered, feeling a great contempt towards Toothless. Why was he doing this? "Toothless..."

::Fix this::: the dragon ordered. ::Fix whatever has happened between you two. You shouldn't leave angry with her:::

"Tooth—"

::Consider, for a moment, what we've come up here to do:::

Hiccup blinked. They were going to face off against a demon...

They were going to fight a demon.

Camicazi's anger with him the night before, after he revealed this, somehow seemed to fit so much better than it did at the time. He was treating this like it would blow over, and they'd eventually forgive each other as they always had in petty squabbles. He treated it like he had luck and time when there was a good chance he'd never see her again.

The Bog Burglars, still relatively new to having to constantly fight dragons, remained hesitant in their approach. It could have been Camicazi's threat, but Hiccup found the distinct lack of charging and war cries rather heartening. Maybe he could reach these people, people who only fought dragons a couple of times a year before this war blew up.
He released a breath.

Right. First human allies.

Hiccup slid from Toothless' saddle, unhurried in his movements so not to startle anyone—including himself—into action. Toothless seemed to have faith that Camicazi would protect them, so he would extend the same courtesy.

"Yes, I am Hiccup, former son to Stoick the Vast," he affirmed, keeping his voice low and measured. "And this is Toothless, my Night Fury."

"Weapons down," Camicazi reminded them. The warriors looked pained to adhere. They stood before the legendary Night Fury, the disgraced son of Berk, and they were ordered into inaction. Distance was their only weapon.

Satisfied she would be obeyed, Camicazi came up to Toothless—ignoring Brüna's cry to get away—and began to scratch the top of his head. Toothless moved into the hand, acting the part of a happy pet.

The less threatening they appeared, the less likely they would be stabbed.

Hiccup came to stand next to Camicazi, perhaps trying to create a meager shield between Toothless and the Vikings despite his current intentions.

Touching the small of her back, he leaned down to her ear. "Bring them closer."

Nodding, she directed to her fellows, "Come here. He's just a big sweetheart."

Toothless lolled his tongue out of his mouth to reveal his lack of teeth.

"I named him Toothless for a reason," Hiccup added; though he wasn't sure if speaking up would help warm anyone to them. The number of mistrustful glowers had not lessened much since Camicazi turned her attentions to Toothless.

A couple of the younger and braver girls approached, doubt and want mingled openly in their features.

Toothless sniffed at the first hand to near him, breathing hot air against the skin before he nudged his snout into her palm. The owner giggled, sounding more like a village girl than a seafaring warrior. A few other Burglars emerged from the huddled crew, all of the younger demographic.

Most of the older women preferred to stand back, some actually moving farther away as the dragon's presence grew increasingly accepted on the ship.

"You're a traitor," a squat looking woman from the back spoke up, but she posed it closer to a question.

"I am not," Hiccup griped. He was outlawed, but traitor was a bit strong for his tastes. Hearing it from someone else's lips sounded wrong to him. "I left to learn more about this war, and now I'm back. Toothless and I are going to find a way to put an end to this."

Camicazi removed her concentration from Toothless' scales and locked eyes with him. She looked subdued, resigned to the path he had chosen and whatever fate it may lead him to.

Hiccup continued to hold her gaze as he added, "Humans and dragons need to work together to set
things right again."

"Mad..." a whisper popped out. More opposing vocalizations would have surely picked up had Camicazi not interjected.

"It's true," she said strongly. "We've all been deceived by a demon for centuries, and its power has only grown. This problem won't end on its own. We all need to make some changes if we want to survive."

She didn't know this for sure, she only had Hiccup's word to go on, but it was enough. Sure, Hiccup omitted information and he bent the truth from time to time, but he didn't make up lies.

::Ohhh, yessss::

Hiccup glanced down at Toothless' pleased hiss. About four sets of hands were scratching and rubbing along his scales, and it was obvious the dragon was in ecstasy. The girls seemed to enjoy themselves as well, cooing and giggling at Toothless' wiggles and purrs. He could hardly match them to the same women he used to cower from as a child during their visits.

Hiccup kept his surprise and misgivings under wraps, choosing to smile gently at them instead. In truth, he was happier than he could say over Toothless' quick acceptance with the tribe.

A thought suddenly occurred to him, and he felt he had to ask on Toothless' behalf.

"Are there any other Night Furies? I mean, any attacking the islands?" He directed the question to no one in particular.

"Nay," Brüna harrumphed. She clearly held him in disfavor for things outside of running off with a dragon. "Haven't heard of one going on a couple years now."

::So no one else from my drove was captured:: Toothless concluded sounding both relieved and saddened. He was still the only one to fall into such a trap.

He couldn't work up the proper sting to his pride when those wonderful, slender fingers scratched all the dry flakes from his scales. Hiccup didn't pamper him often enough—not like this. Maybe there were benefits to having females around with their tiny, quick hands...

"Oh, rub his belly here!" Camicazi indicated to the spot at the base of Toothless' ribs, and the dragon rolled to his side to give the girls an easier access.

The girls squealed at the action, but closed in further. More departed from the safety of the crowd to join in on the action. Toothless' leg started kicking as the women descended on him, the many fingers sending electric sparks of pleasure through his limbs.

Hiccup jerked at seeing Toothless exposed to so many Vikings, but clamped down on the reflex to jump in between them. There were too many smiles for him to act out against this, too many positive exclamations floating up from the tittering warriors.

"Oh, he's so cute!"

"Who'd've thought?"

"Who's a big cuddly dwagon? You are! Yes, you are!"

"Think I can get one...?"
A gentle but firm grip closed in on his wrist, and Hiccup soon found Camicazi ushering him away from his dragon's latest fan club. He resisted a little—his initial impulse would always be to guard Toothless from humans—but his faith in Camicazi's command over her crew won out.

"If you're not planning on pampering Toothless, then I suggest you get back to work," she called out to the women still standing around, her hand tightening around Hiccup's wrist. This spurred the rest of the crew into joining in on the coddling, or to move back to their assigned tasks.

"Can we feed him?" a girl—the same who retrieved the rubies—asked.

::YES!:: Toothless cried out from his cage of women.

Hiccup grinned. "He likes fish. Preferably cod. No eel."

A few more whispers popped up,

"Fish? Really?"

"I'd of thought something more...meaty."

"Well, you learn something new every day, I suppose."

"And where're you two going?" Brüna the Butch had popped up right in front of Hiccup and Camicazi. Hiccup, too distracted in keeping an eye on Toothless, hadn't even realized he was being led toward the deckhouse.

"I'm going to show him that thing we found," Camicazi assured her. Brüna didn't move, her stance radiating foreboding. The smaller girl rolled her eyes. "Come on, Brü. If there's anyone who knows what to do about it, it's him."

Hiccup, who had no idea what 'it' could possibly be, gave the large brunette a weak smile that went unreturned.

Camicazi moved around the wide woman, tugging Hiccup into following her. She released his hand only to pick up her fallen ceramic cup. The force at which it had been thrown from her hands left a chip in the lip. She frowned at the red-stained mess it left.

"Ugh, you made me spill my tea..."

Hiccup rolled his eyes, instantly reminded of what brought him over there in the first place.

"Oh, gods, I'm so sorry."

"It's mugwort," she pointed out, irate. At Hiccup's blank stare she added, "A contraceptive..."

Hiccup's mouth fell open in a small 'oh'.

"Then I really am sorry."

Brüna raised her eyebrows, looking between Hiccup and Camicazi.

"Off with ya," Camicazi waved as she saw the woman open her mouth. "I need you on the wheel."

Brüna huffed and threw her hands in the air as if signifying she was done with trying to keep the young captain in line. She stalked off towards the helm muttering all the while under her breath.
"You're off your head, you numptie...your maw'll give you a skelpit lug when she finds out..."

Camicazi grinned fondly at the ample back and reattached herself to Hiccup's arm, pulling him off the deck.

"Wait—Toothless—"

"He'll be fine," Camicazi assured him. "He's under my protection. And the girls love him."

"But—"

::I'm fine:: Toothless reaffirmed. He hardly sounded coherent, which didn't help to ease Hiccup's mind. ::If anything bad happens I'll just start lighting everything on fire. That's usually our default plan, isn't it? Ooooh, that's the spot!::

Hiccup made a pained noise as Camicazi opened the cabin door and shoved him inside. The strength generated from such a small body would never cease to amaze him.

"Where are we going?" He trusted Camicazi—to an extent. With valuables, no, but with Toothless, yes.

"We found a Terror in our cargo two days ago," she explained. As soon as the words left her mouth Hiccup's resistance fell.

"What did you do with it?"

"Well...it's behavior was...weird. It wasn't attacking us, or anything. It kind of just seemed lost. So we threw a crate over it and left it."

"For two days?"

Camicazi winced.

"Yes? And we don't know how long it's been in there to begin with. How long can they go without food?"

"Not sure." He didn't even know how often the dragons were fed in Berk's Kill Ring. "I'd guess it's been here since you were in the demon's territory. Probably broke into your ship looking for food, you sailed off, and the demon eventually lost control."

"Hmm..." Camicazi entered first into the storage cabin. Despite the stacks upon stacks of supply crates, Hiccup didn't need to wonder which one had the Terror. In the center of the room was an overturned, wooden crate with a rusted anchor weighing it down. If the Terror tried to burn its way out it would probably end up crushed.

It could sense their presence immediately; from within the crate came frantic clawing and squeaks.

Hiccup shook his head, his heart going out to the frightened thing.

"Hey, hey. It's okay, fella," he softly crooned as he approached. He glanced back at Camicazi. "Stand in front of the door."

She did so, watching with the barest hints of apprehension as Hiccup began to shove the anchor off of the crate.

"How do you know it won't attack you?" she asked. Her hand stayed by her hip, by her most
available weapon.

"I don't," Hiccup shrugged between shoves. "But I know I smell more like a dragon than you do, and that should help."

With one final grunt he pushed the anchor off the makeshift prison. The crate upended the second the weight was removed, and a pastel blur shot out from under it. Hiccup followed the screeching dragon with his eyes to the best of its ability as it scrambled around the room, looking for an escape. It came nowhere near Camicazi—it could smell the metal on her—and eventually had to settle in the darkest corner available.

Hiccup approached slowly, crouching down a safe distance from its trembling form. He sighed at how it shivered, curling in on itself in a weak form of protection.

"Poor thing," he murmured. He reached a hand out, drawing as much calm and sympathy as he could into his demeanor.

It glared at him over its wing, hissing at the very human fingers reaching out to it.

"Hey," Hiccup coaxed, "come on, I'm not gonna hurt you..." Damn, he wished he had some food. "Come on, little buddy. It's all right. Come here..."

The tiny beak twitched. Once. Twice. Its head emerged further from its winged cocoon, drifting closer to his hand.

Hiccup turned his palm to face upward. "See? I have nothing to hurt you with."

It nosed its way to the very tips of his finger pads. Hiccup risked moving one against the underside of its chin. It jerked back for just a moment, and then cautioned forward. Hiccup continued the movement against its scales, and the dragon began to ease into the pressure.

"There...that's not so bad, now is it?" Hiccup soothed in that soft, loving voice he saved for dragons. It purred, climbing up to his legs, bumping against his hand strongly.

Hiccup laughed at the greedy conduct.

"You're just a friendly little guy, aren't you?" He glanced over his shoulder at Camicazi, who lingered uncertainly from her spot. She looked like she desperately wanted to join in the petting. He beckoned her with a motion of his head. "Come here."

She did so, biting her lip in anticipation. She didn't have that same fear in her movements from when she first met Toothless; Camicazi clearly itched to cuddle the small dragon.

Hiccup gathered the Terror into his arms with no resistance and stood to face the young woman. The dragon blinked at being presented to a new human, and immediately hissed at her.

"It's okay!" Hiccup hushed it. Its claws dug into his chest. Its tail swished against his stomach.

"What did I do?" Camicazi asked.

"He knows about your weapons," Hiccup explained. He continued to pet the dragon along the back of its neck, murmuring softly. "It's okay. She's a friend...she won't hurt you...

Camicazi had smile at her childhood friend; at the way he held the Terror like parent would a child.

"You're still just a big softie aren't you?" she commented.
Hiccup chuckled, knowing he could never argue the point.

"Here, try this spot..."

He indicated to the base of its large, rounded jaw. Camicazi slowly brought her hand up to it and tickled the elected area when it didn't snap or hiss at her further.

The purring restarted, growing even louder than before, and within moments the Terror had turned to vehemently nuzzling against Camicazi's hand.

Camicazi laughed with delight.

"Oh, he is just precious! I can't believe we haven't figured this out before now. Come here, little guy!"

The dragon abandoned Hiccup in a heartbeat, leaping from one human to the next.

"Ouch," Hiccup joked. "That was fast."

Camicazi continued to pet the purring Terror as she strode out of the storage cabin, fully expecting Hiccup to follow her.

"I think he just likes girls better," she said flippantly. "I think Toothless does as well."

The thought actually worried Hiccup, if only for how helpless the dragon seemed at the ministrations of so many petting hands.

"Inga!" Camicazi called out to a passing crewmate. The woman, no older than her mid-twenties, paused in her walk. "Do me a favor and take this little guy to the galley. Get him some fish for me, will ya?"

Inga's jaw dropped. She did nothing at first; perhaps having received one too many strange orders from the fresh captain that morning.

"Um..."

"It's fine, he's as much as sweetheart as Toothless, see?" Camicazi tickled the Terror's jaw in that same spot Hiccup told her to. The little dragon squealed and nuzzled against the blonde's chin in pure affection.

Inga's face alighted at the sight, suddenly much more eager to the task.

"Right, miss!" She held out her arms to the Terror. The dragon hesitated for but a moment, but the similarities in disposition and scent between women won him over, and, yet again, Hiccup bore witness to the human-bouncing dragon.

He suspecting warming women to dragons first would be key in Berk.

"Come'on," Camicazi demanded of Hiccup the second she was free. She grabbed his arm and began dragging him elsewhere.

"Where are we going now?" Hiccup grumbled, wanting to get back to Toothless. They had a mission to complete. Though he would admit he was glad they made this stop—not only did he get his rubies back, he got the ball rolling with his "dragon awareness" project. "Do you have another dragon lurking around here?"
Camicazi laughed. "No, but I think I'm ready for a dragon of my own. I had no idea they were all so...affectionate!"

Hiccup grinned. "Well, they aren't all that way." He remembered the wyvrens, the Changewing in yen. "But, in my experience, Terrors are pretty friendly. Just show them some love and you've got a friend for life."

Camicazi stopped at a door, turning to him with a wide smile.

"Sounds a lot like a certain dragon-rider I know."

Before Hiccup could comment on that (because he wasn't that easy), the young woman shoved the door open with excessive flair, striding inward.

"Captain's cabin!" she announced, spreading her arms wide to the slightly messy, but relatively spacious room. "It's finally mine! It only took me about seventeen years of ass-kicking to earn it."

Normally one could argue that infants and toddlers couldn't "kick-ass", and therefore should not be included in that time frame. Camicazi would be the only exception.

Hiccup followed her into the center of the room, immediately noticing the eclectic style. Everything had to have been stolen—even the bed linens.

"You like it in here?" Hiccup asked, his eyebrows rising as he took in every wall. It was the largest under-deck compartment for sleeping, probably the most spacious, and it did have a window. But didn't she feel...trapped?

"Hey," he heard Camicazi utter, her voice heavy compared to her previously lighthearted declarations. He turned to see her shutting the door to her private quarters.

Hiccup gave a weary laugh.

"Oh no... Nope. The last time I did that, I ended up quite a bit poorer than I started."

"Toothless has your stuff," she reminded him. "So there's nothing I can take from you but your time. You're just mad that I got you and you never saw it coming."

"And then I got my revenge, so I'd like to leave while things are square."

"I don't think they're square," she grumbled, remembering Hiccup's rather exaggerated idea of revenge. She further swore, "I'll have the last laugh..."

"You're doing a great job at convincing me to stay," he assured her with all his signature cynicism. He tried to move around her, but Camicazi latched onto both his arms.

"Stay, please?" she begged. "I don't want you to leave mad at me."

He sighed. "I'm not mad."

He was a little mad.

"Please?" Her lips were pert and drawn towards her slightly upturned nose to form a most enticing pout. She batted her eyelashes.

Hiccup remained unmoved. "That is so fake."
Camicazi’s face dropped. That usually worked about fifty percent of the time.

"How many women did you sleep with?" she demanded.

"Just one!" Hiccup drew away from her, sounding offended.

Camicazi narrowed her eyes further, judging his response as untruthful.

"You have not! You..." her eyes widened in budding awareness. "You had a lover..."

That was different from an isolated hookup, and almost unheard of among the younger Burglars who wished to remain single. Camicazi was raised to believe in variety, to always have an objective eye when it came to men. A lover meant repeated encounters, learning about one another, engaging in sheer, raw familiarity that broke half of her tribe's protective codes.

Hiccup shrugged, not understanding the absolute astonishment that had stolen her features. "So have you."

She shook her head. A sad smile moved across her face. "No...they were all one night stands. No one worth knowing. They weren't satisfying."

She felt like crying after her first time. It was uncomfortable and she felt nothing but used and she couldn't see the appeal in ever doing it again. Her mother told her to put it all behind her; not to be callous, but to treat her as every other Burglar was to be treated after those first confusing days of introspection. Looking back, she supposed it strengthened her, taught her not to expect sympathy if she planned on treating men as means to an end. She learned, slowly, after that. It became easier with every new venture. And then it became fun.

And then, just recently, it became uncomfortably close.

Hiccup would never understand the significance of what he did, how he treated her, how he touched her, because he knew nothing but intimacy. She shouldn't have been surprised over this revelation, because this was Hiccup. He was an all-or-nothing kind of guy.

The young man had an enlightened grin on his face.

"You...think I'm satisfying?"

Camicazi didn't mean to smile, because she rarely liked to encourage that sort of confidence in a man. But the boyish surprise in Hiccup's voice was too cute and so entirely Hiccup.

It was okay to break rules if it was with him. They could never be together, but they could create their own plane of existence. Their tenth world.

She ran a finger down his chest, catching the collar and exposing more freckled skin.

"I don't know, I think I need a reminder..."

Hiccup laughed, and it wasn't a low chuckle that would follow the intended mood but a loud, obnoxious laugh.

Camicazi removed her hand.

"What?"

"You can't pull off coy," he taunted.
Her next pout had far less allure, and far more petulance to it.

"I can too!"

He started laughing again. Camicazi knew she probably couldn't pull off coy—surely, not like a Greek woman could. She wasn't as good at manipulating as she was with carrying outright threats.

A darker smile appeared on her face.

"Fine." She fist the shoulders of his tunic, making sure he wouldn't leave. "Let's do everything that was considered taboo in Miklagard."

Hiccup choked on his last laugh.

Chapter End Notes

Camicazi IS relevant, despite my aversion to writing "romantic" interactions. But it's the boys from here on out.

Berk is next!
Imagined

Chapter Summary

Toothless confronts one haunting aspect of his past and Hiccup finally meets the Demon

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Imagined

When Toothless and Hiccup wanted to get somewhere fast, they got there fast. No more dawdling, or chatting in English with locals, or exploring or camping or wrestling. They slept by day and covered air by night, often traveling by foot when it was still too light out to fly.

Hiccup almost felt they progressed too quickly, for the closer he got to Berk, the more his stomach soured. All planning on how to handle the demon had to be put on hold. Hiccup insisted that they needed more information to prepare any reliable strategy and Toothless, while wary of ever coming into close proximity with the demon again, agreed.

They spent their last full day of rest on a rocky outcropping in Foula, unpopulated and perfect to recuperate in the Skurpla sun, dining on mackerel and ensuring they would be in the best of shape for what lie ahead.

The flight to Suðuroy turned out to be just as long as Hiccup remembered, but long flights they could handle. He worried more about the unexpected. He only had rumors and Camicazi's warnings to color his imagination with possible horrors to be faced—and with nothing but dark ocean, the occasional wispy cloud, and a little bit more dark ocean for outside stimulation, his imagination would not let up. Beasts with eyes aglow and such awesome mind powers that he would jump straight off of Toothless' back and into the ocean, fire so hot Framherja would melt into his back and seal against his ribs, stopping his heart in a most excruciating manner...

Toothless losing his mind, turning on him, flying them straight into an awaiting mouth...

Hiccup had long since come to the point where he would rather get this encounter over with than suffer his accursed creativity any longer.

"Are we there yet?"

::For the last time, no!::

Silence fell over the pair once more. The moon was full and bright, but it did little to keep Hiccup alert when the only break in scenery consisted of waves.

"How about now?"

::HICCUP!::

The boy collapsed forwards, resting his chin on the top of the dragon's head.
"I'm sorry! I—This is taking forever. I can't sense anything! I don't even know what I'm supposed to be looking for!"

::It's probably not something you could sense anyway:: Toothless shrugged. ::Rest assured, I will let you know as soon as we trespass into her territory::

"But I hate waiting..."

Toothless released a forbearing sigh and shook the human from his head. He happened to catch both of Hiccup's cheeks with well-aimed earfins.

::I know:: Toothless inflicted wryly. ::But I waited for you with that fairy-female, and you took forever. You can wait a little longer::

Hiccup rubbed his stinging cheeks, unexpectedly hot against the biting winds.

"Oh no...no, no. Don't you d—You're the one who decided it would be a great idea to land on the boat of man-eaters. Do you have any idea how badly that could have gone?"

::We could have left right after:: Toothless reminded him. ::You had to prance off—::

"No!" Hiccup snapped, refusing to take the full blame. "No! You were...you were all over those girls you—you can't blame me. You chose to land first and you were not complaining when Cami asked me to see the Terror..."

::We got them to listen. You have people who believe you now. Focus on that::

Hiccup could still recognize how lucky they were. In all honestly, he thought their encounter with the Bogs turned out for the best—and against every odd at that, seeing how he shamelessly tormented their captain beforehand whilst sustaining a reputation to precede him. The older crowd on the ship never approached Toothless, and many continued to give the dragon mistrustful looks long after they departed, but Hiccup had opened some eyes, and they were the eyes that related best to the captain of the ship.

It also served as a confirmation on who to target if he survived and ever got around to spreading dragon awareness. His generation, those younger, the ones who didn't have a lifetime of war ingrained into their blood just yet...those were the minds that could still be opened to this sort of bond with a dragon.

If he died, at least the truth wouldn't die with him.

Still, he couldn't quite get over how reckless Toothless had been with their safety. Even if he took it for granted not too shortly after.

"Why would you even care about that?" he grumbled. Toothless cared more about ending the demon's control over dragons than uniting dragons and humans.

::I didn't, really. But you were going to do that thing you do again::

Hiccup curled his lip. He hadn't the faintest idea of what Toothless babbled about.

"Thing? What thing?"

::You know...that thing you do, where you think about doing something and then fly away::
"What are you talking about?"
::You did it when we first left your nest. That blade-female who hurt you. You thought about following her. I could see it in your face. I could see you thinking about how events would play if you had. With your imagination::

Hiccup rested back in the saddle, unable to find any words to argue the speculation because he had wanted to stop her.
::But then you didn't::

"Okay," Hiccup conceded when control over his tongue came back to him. "But don't pretend for a second you aren't glad I left."

Toothless went on as though Hiccup never spoke. ::Then you did it with the soft-female::

Doris.

"We had to leave," Hiccup said automatically, too quickly.
::You didn't say goodbye:: Toothless continued. ::You stood there and stared at her forever. You wasted more time second-guessing yourself than action. After all that, you left after doing nothing::

"I had to."
::You still didn't say goodbye, in the end::

"I—" Hiccup had thought about that night over and over. He still, to this day, didn't understand Doris or her motives, where her loyalties lie or if she were truly interested in him. He chose to leave. He had to leave. "It's too dangerous to take those chances. If I had gone after Astrid, if I had woken Doris..."

Doris could have tried to stop them, perhaps already had some system in place because she was meant to watch them. Their simple escape could have quickly turned into something neither of them had foreseen...much like their entrance.

And going after Astrid...

She could have turned tail and killed him for being a traitor. She could have refused to see reason—his reason, anyway—and told on them. Or worse, they could have been forced to do something with her to keep her mouth shut, to keep their secret...

Hiccup shook the unsettling scenarios from his mind.

"Look," he said after he managed after collecting his wits, "the safer thing for us would have been to leave. In all cases. It's the lesser of the unknowns; at least when we're off on our own we're safer." It was their truth, their creed. In the end, trusting others would always prove dangerous to them.

::Then why does it always make you so sad::

Hiccup swallowed and glanced down at the ocean far, far below them. His stomach still folded in on itself whenever he tried to picture Doris' face when she woke up to find them missing. But it was safest...for them. Even if people involved got hurt, they were alive and free. That had to be their first priority.

::You were going to do it again::
"No—" Hiccup began, weak.

::You leave your problems when you're given the option::

"I—"

::I couldn't let you do it again. This female was closet to you—it would have hurt you the most::

"It was still dangerous," Hiccup griped under his breath, because Toothless was right. If he had left Camicazi, feeling angry and betrayed even after he got his rubies back...

::We live dangerous lives:: Toothless countered. ::Occupational hazard::

"Yeah, well...it wasn't just my life that was in danger."

He recalled Brüna as an intimidating figure when he was younger, but never had the women stared at him as though he were riddled with disease. The hostility she directed towards him when he returned to the deck could have been concentrated and used as a weapon.

::You can't simply fly away from all your problems, Hiccup::

Hiccup wouldn't stand for any more condescension from his dragon.

"Hey, hey! I'm flying to this problem."

::Yes, and I'm very proud of you:: Toothless responded, never one to pass up an opportunity to patronize his human.

"Fine... Fine. Yeah, okay, then we're going to find your drove after this," Hiccup decided on the spot. "And you can get that girl-Fury back."

::What?:: Hiccup smiled at high-pitched ring Toothless' voice took on. ::That—that has nothing to do with anything! Where is this coming from?::

"Yes," the young man firmly nodded his head, liking the idea more and more. "If we survive, that is. It'll be straight to the North for us."

Hiccup expected some sort of comeback, even another slap to the cheek via earfin. He didn't anticipate Toothless shaking his head like he suddenly had a bug in his ear. He did so again and again, the plates lining his skull twitching madly.

"Toothless...?"

::It's...it's much sooner...her power has grown::

Hiccup's spine stiffened, his heart hastened.

"Her...the demon? You mean we—we're...?"

He had forgotten...in those moments of arguing with Toothless, in that lull of waiting, he had somehow forgotten where they were headed. He remembered now; all the fear and painful anticipation began to build and weave into a bezoar of panic Hiccup had to forcibly and repeatedly swallow down.

::Yeah...:: Toothless sounded like he could hardly breathe.
Hiccup began rubbing circles in the side of the dragon's neck, wanting to remind the dragon in any way he could that he wasn't alone. "It's okay...it's—How are you buddy?"

::I'm okay:: Toothless immediately replied, but he didn't sound certain. ::I can sense her...we're in her area now::

Hiccup's eyes darted around the vicinity, trying to find some marker to this boundary, but all he could make out was an increase in clouds. They seemed to thicken in their path, low hanging and clammy.

Hiccup took a shallow breath. "Think we can move in further?"

They would have to anyway, to reach land. But if Toothless couldn't do it...they would turn back. All the way back to Foula, if need be.

::Yeah:: Hiccup could tell Toothless tried to sound assuring in his consent, but the dragon's uneasiness was all too noticeable. ::I can feel her but...but I think I'm okay...::

Hiccup allowed a small smile. "You're repeating yourself."

The opacity surrounded them now, a dense and cold fog which soon replaced the moon's purpose with a light of its own. It felt wrong against Hiccup's cheeks and knuckles, as sinister and tainted as the caress of Hel's boned fingers. The young man felt a new appreciation for the tunic he had taken to wearing underneath a vest, not only for the warmth but to protect any more of his skin from subjection.

"What is this?" he choked in to his sleeve, unwilling to breathe in more than he had to. It would soon be impossible; disgusting as the substance felt in his body, it only thickened as they flew onward—an atmosphere that certainly didn't exist when he left. Hiccup chanced a look behind him but the mist had swallowed them whole. Navigation fell to Toothless now.

::It's from her. It's part of her essence somehow. It's strengthened as she has::

Hiccup grimaced. No wonder he didn't want to breathe it in.

::Do you want to find land or do you want to find the nest first?::

Hiccup blinked against the fog; its temperature had begun to sting his eyeballs.

"What?"

::She's to the right. We're closer to her. But the nearest land will be to our left. We should decide now::

"Well," Hiccup scrambled to make a decision. He felt off balance in this mist, and being so close to the demon—the thought of finally seeing it—terrified him. "How are you feeling?"

::I could do it now. She hasn't pulled me in yet. I can feel her against my scales, all around us, but I've been safe so far. I think it will hold out. I can handle a visit from her::

"You can? Are you sure?"

::I'm not sure of anything:: Toothless freely admitted ::But we've made it this far...I feel like I need to do this now...because if I turn away in this moment, if I pass this up, I'll just keep thinking of excuses not to do it::
"Yeah," Hiccup whispered. He couldn't imagine deciding to come back into this mist knowing it would be here. "I feel exactly the same way."

::Then get ready, because we'll be there soon::

"Will this get thicker?" Hiccup coughed. It felt too thick now, filling his mouth. What if it was poisonous? What if it had lasting effects to a human? Would bonding with Toothless protect him?

::It'll thin out once we reach the nest, I promise:: Toothless paused a moment before adding, ::Or from what I can remember, anyway::

Hiccup closed his eyes, shutting out the oppressing miasma. It only augmented the sensations he felt searing his ears like the decayed nails of a draugr, so he focused on the fine shifts of Toothless' body, the well of heat Framherja encumbered him with. He relinquished control to the dragon, entrusting their relatively safe deliverance to the nest in Toothless wings.

::Going down::

It was the only warning Hiccup got before Toothless arched his body downward, pulling in his wings. Hiccup's foot flipped into first, his fingers automatically tightened against the thick cusp of the saddle, and his body absorbed every sensation of diving and burning ice.

The sound of a thousand whispers suddenly filled his ears; harmonious, incoherent rasps as thick as the haze. Hiccup couldn't remember when it started or from where it came—it could have been a part of the mist the whole time and had only impressed upon him now.

The Night Fury's body worked as they flew, sweeping and swooping and weaving through something. Hiccup made an effort to open his eyes from time to time, but dizziness had taken a hold of him. That poison had touched his lungs too much and he tried his damndest not to breathe it, not to cough too loudly—he focused on Toothless and his foot, wondering if they actually spent an eternity navigating this or if this were only the beginning.

When the disquieting touch of that fog began to lighten and a faint heat began to wash over his face, Hiccup finally blinked his eyes to attentiveness.

The fog was still there, but thinner. Shadow after shadow appeared, materializing into stacked rocks, and avoided just as quickly. Water rippled below them as they zigzagged in a pattern Hiccup couldn't keep up with.

He could breathe easier, but where his throat received respite, his mind picked up turmoil. His stomach knotted at the largest stone to materialize yet—too large for his full vision to grasp, and too large to dodge. A volcano.

"This..."

::The nest. Yes::

"Are you okay?" Hiccup got out in a crushed whisper as they rocketed towards an opening in the dank wall. Not even the unknown would slow them down.

They pitched into the opening and his vision was lost to him once more. Framherja hummed against his back, and Hiccup took comfort in knowing he was sandwiched between two forms of protection.

::I'm fine:: Toothless said shortly. Hiccup detected a hint of aggression from the Night Fury, though not directed at him. An older Toothless began to emerge with every passing moment. One full of...
vengeance and wounded pride. Toothless would face the demon with a clear mind—the possibility was becoming fact with each wingspan traveled—and with this realization came a darker intent. Hiccup wouldn't quell the belligerence. Toothless needed this; Hiccup learned enough, picked up enough of his friend to know this was a healing process for dragons. Vengeance could destroy a human from the inside out. But for a dragon, it was pride's ointment.

His hand returned to rub Toothless' scales once more. The dragon had his support for this.

They remerged from the passage through the volcano wall, and the first human to ever cross into the dragon's nest felt his breath torn from him. He was here—he was in the nest. It was magnificent and terrifying and more crowded than he could have anticipated. He was aware of hundreds—thousands—of dragons huddled against every free rock and ledge. He was aware of the sheer size of this volcano—appearing larger than any island off of Berk, larger than how it looked from the outside.

A pool of smoke swirled below, but it could have been fire for all the heat and hellish light that emitted from it. Unnaturalness rose alongside the extreme temperature. The hairs on Hiccup's arms, on the back of his neck, reached upward to warn him against ever nearing it. Framherja managed to make her way from his shoulders to ready in his grip without him ever realizing.

Toothless circled the walls, clinging to the edges of the hollow for reasons Hiccup wouldn't question. He, too, felt safer, less exposed in this strategy; the dragons may serve as an obvious danger, but the obscurity of the chasm somehow read as the more perilous of the two.

They bypassed lines and lines of inactive dragons—dragons Hiccup had only seen in the manual before, dragons he had never seen at all. None reacted to them. None gave them a sparing glance. Either they couldn't see the human on board, or they couldn't see at all.

Eventually—and it could have taken no time at all—Toothless managed to find an open spot between a Monstrous Nightmare and a dragon unrecognizable to Hiccup. The unknown dragon resembled a Gronkle in size and shape, but with larger wings folded at its back and a long horn situated in the center of its crest. It stared out over the ledge, unresponsive to their arrival.

The Nightmare was also unresponsive, but it, at least, faced them. Hiccup never got to face the Nightmare in the kill ring; he had only ever seen Nightmares up close when he slipped out during raids, and even then it was all teeth and flashes of a red, hulking figure in the firelight. He never imagined having one sitting so docile next to him, towering over him in its passive observation.

But this wasn't docile as a contented, purring Terror would be in his lap. What Hiccup faced was a statue—a statue with dead, glassy eyes to serve as windows to a breathing body. He could feel those eyes stare straight through him.

He opened his mouth, thinking if he should say something to provoke it, to see if it were even alive. The stare made him uncomfortable.

As a thought came to him—how loud should he speak?—audio consciously registered for the second time. The same sounds he experienced outside but louder, far beyond a whisper. A chorus of hums and croons and rattles swirled and meshed like the miasma below. The dragons were speaking—possibly singing. They continued to make this noise, each with its own vibrato that miraculously synced with every other dragon, for reasons Hiccup could only imagine.

He imagined they were crying for help.

"Hey," he chanced a rough whisper to the unseeing Nightmare. No response. The subtle shifts of its shoulders with each breath were the only clue that it even lived. After another beat it blinked.
They can hear you: Toothless decided on mentioning then. They can see you too. They're simply too...too apathetic to acknowledge you:

The echoes of a haunting remembrance could not be hidden from Hiccup's ears. His hand immediately went to rubbing Toothless' neck. "Toothless, are you okay?"

He must asked it a dozen times already, but he had to keep checking. It wasn't just mind control Toothless worried about. He worried about any lasting damage this experience may have done to Toothless, whether their stint in the south was quite enough for the dragon to recover.

Toothless wasn't being controlled by the demon, he was responding to Hiccup at least, but Hiccup could feel the dragon trembling slightly under his fingers.

Yes: The same assurance to the same question.

Before anything more could be said a string of dragons swooped in, each burdened by livestock. The sudden emergence startled Hiccup into gripping Framherja so tightly his fingers cramped. Fascinated and tense, he watched as they swung over the center of the open pit to drop their haul one by one, and then continued their flight to any open spot found against the wall. It happened so quickly, so efficiently, that it could have been choreographed.

"They're feeding her?" He posed it as a question, but Hiccup knew it to be true. He followed the bodies in their fall, his imagination trying and failing to liken such a sensation, such a fate. He could have sworn he saw that goat flailing—still alive—before the miasma swallowed it. "She's down there?"

Yes: Came the hushed reply.

"Have you seen her?"

Did she even come out?

Yes: Toothless repeated. When her appetite surpassed what she's fed, she'd take one of us:

The crooning, the rattling, ceased. The awareness of the silence slammed into Hiccup with the weight of that neighboring Nightmare's stare. Those benumbed, amber eyes looked at him now. It looked at him with an increasing awareness that seemed to synchronize with his own welling dread.

Only the stare of the dragon behind it could drag Hiccup's eyes away. And of the dragon behind that one, and the dragon behind that one...

His heart pounded in his throat as he realized every beast lining the wall now focused on him. Him and Toothless.

"Toothless..." he whispered, warning ringing in his voice louder than his own breath. They needed to leave.

No sooner had that thought passed his mind, undoubtedly shared by his companion, did something happen. A voice rose and ricocheted off every rock and scale, blooming from the very pores of the volcano, filling the silence with something far worse.

A PRESENCE SENSED! NEW AND WRONG...

It could have been female; it could have been melodious or broken, chimeful or discordant. Hiccup couldn't categorize it. It was there, and it was immoral.
"What is that?" Hiccup croaked out. His fingers curled around Framherja's string so tightly he could have been bleeding. He didn't know whether to look at the swirling miasma a lifetime below them, or at any of the thousands of eyes fixated on the pair of them. They needed to leave...they needed to leave...

::You can hear her?::: Toothless sounded just as stricken as Hiccup felt, but it could have very well been because they both heard the same thing. ::How is it—how can you—?:::

Hiccup was less concerned with *how* and more concerned with *whom*.

"That was *her*?"

He was too afraid to move—he knew they were found out, but some illogical part of his terror-filled mind kept him believing that they could still make it without detection. He *wanted* to believe they still had stealth on their side.

**FAMILIAR COMPANY BRINGS A MEAL! NOT TO SHARE, BUT FROM ME STEAL?**

The voice crooned, falsely delighted. The Nightmare to his left shifted. No life came to its eyes with the movement, but its body appeared to ready for action. Hiccup tensed further still; knees locking, ankle loose, tailfin positioned, bowstring plucked. He tried to spread his awareness to his surroundings, mark every dragon near him, keep his mind calm *and* gather that volatile energy within his chest to power the bow.

::We need to get out now:::

Hiccup hadn't seen the demon himself, but he had seen enough. Heard enough. It was teasing them now; it knew of them.

"Yes, please."

**AN EMPTY SPOT WITHIN MY CRAW CRAVES YOUR FLESH, YOUR BONES BLED RAW!**

The Nightmare lunged but they had already shot off the ledge. Screams and screeches filled the air; a thousand wings beat against scaled bodies and through stifling air as the "shelves" were cleared. Every available dragon dove after them.

A multicolored vortex of winged reptiles enwrapped them within moments of take off. Toothless' sleek and smaller build allowed for them to dart around those dragons closest, to angle away from the sharpest divers. This would prove to be their greatest obstacle course yet, and somewhere deep within his fear-seized heart, the prospect excited Hiccup.

Even through the dim, reddish lighting, Hiccup could make out where they entered. The breach was below them—a temporary path just barely visible within the crashing sentry. *They could make it.*

"Exit—!" Hiccup gasped out, he flicked the tailfin to turn, but Toothless fought it.

**YOUR FEAR! YOUR FEAR! SO SWEET! SO STRONG!**

::Up first!::

"BUT—!" A cover of Zipplebacks and Fleshfangs overlay them.
TO TEASE MY TONGUE, YOUR LIVES ARE GONE!

::UP! UP!::

Hiccup obeyed, trusting Toothless—even as they flew towards the descending array of teeth and claws head on.

YOUR ODDS UNFAVORED, MY WEB TOO STRONG!

Miraculously, a number of the dragons began to pull back, shrieking and shaking their heads; eyes bulging in panic and anguish.

SPEED WON'T NEGATE A LINE STEPPED WRONG!

Hiccup pressed himself against Toothless' back and glanced down in time to see white.

Teeth—long, narrow, sharp—as big as trees.

Then the mouth registered...and the head. Hiccup felt time slow around him, just so he could fully comprehend what he stared at. And it was only the head for nothing else could possibly fit within his vision. It emerged from the abyss, remnants of orange-tainted smoke spilling between its teeth.

He reacted—he had all the power and fear and energy he needed. Seized by panic and action, Hiccup risked leaning to the side of the saddle and fired a screeching bolt into the open mouth. It struck the back of it's black tongue, making it impossible to tell if a scorch mark were left, but the dragon stopped in its ascension.

The jaw, so gargantuan in size, took forever to snap shut. It missed them by a long shot, but two Nadders and a Marsh Tiger were not so fortunate.

Hiccup and Toothless weaved through the broken net of dragons—scattered in their last threads of self-preservation.

YOU DARE? DARE SMITE THIS AWESOME BEAST? YOUR FATES ARE SEALED AS MY NEXT FEAST!

Hiccup didn't look down again; they had the head start they needed. They continued to shoot upward, spinning out of reach for any claw or snout that snap at them. The dragons recovering from the scare gave chase once more.

But not once did a dragon shoot fire.

Hiccup and Toothless burst from the top of the volcano—an opening Hiccup hadn't known of until that moment. They moved so quickly, the dragons screaming behind them, that it took Hiccup a moment to register their return to outside.

"That was her—!" Hiccup yelped out the second the icy touches of the mist shocked him out of his stupor. They continued to race into the alabaster murkiness; they couldn't slow, Hiccup couldn't dwell on the horror he had just seen—the master behind this whole war—when the dragons were still following them.

::Yes! That was her! And she's going to drag us back in anyway she can without leaving the nest!::

Hiccup glanced behind him and found it impossible to count how many dragons pursued them. He and Toothless were fast, but they were outnumbered. All it would take was one dragon catching
hold of them and it would be over...

HEED THIS BECK AND HEAR THIS CALL! FIGHT ME STILL, YOUR WILLS SHALL FALL!

Hiccup swore, risking a mouthful of the mist, but he was well past caring about breathing correctly. She sounded just as loud outside, and it suddenly occurred to him that as long as they were in this 'essence' of hers they would still hear her. She could still sense them. She could still control the dragons.

A roar bellowed too closely from below them. Hiccup glanced over his shoulder to see the large, rounded jaw of a Scauldon bob up from the water. It could swim almost as fast as they could fly.

Almost.

The boys soared upwards, glided between tightly positioned rocks, swooped beneath overhangs...little by little, the herd of pursuers fell farther and farther behind.

"So, she's gained even more control over them?"

::Yes! She couldn't have ordered them to do this before!:: Toothless sounded just as bewildered as Hiccup

"But she's not coming out herself?"

::Never does:: Toothless grunted. His speed remained outmatched, but a human burdened him, as did Hiccup's many effects, and they had been flying for so long already. A Timberjack began to gain ground on them; it's wings sounding like blades sharpened upon blades. Every 'shwing' sent a painful chill down Hiccup's spine.

The boy twisted in his seat and drew the string back, releasing the second bolt of the night. This one aimed for a rock arch they just under-passed. It struck true and the earth structure exploded, showering dozens of dragons. He winced and faced forwards, concentrating on helping Toothless maneuver than dwell on any injuries of his making.

The choking smoke began to clear greatly. They left far faster than they entered.

"We're close to the barrier!" Hiccup gasped.

::It's right ahead:: Toothless sounded just as excited as Hiccup. They escaped with their lives, what was not to be excited about?

Hiccup could almost envision the exact line of where the demon's hold would release. Where he would once again feel the moon upon his back, and his lungs would fill with salt and moisture rather than toxicant.

A Nightmare, miraculously, managed to stay a few wingspans behind them, but they were well out of its reach. Soon, all too soon, they would be untouchable to the handful of dragons that could keep up with them.

"Wait!"

Hiccup switched the tailfin into third while re-shouldering Framherja.

::What are you doing?:: Toothless roared, but he went with the suggestion, looping high and
backwards to retrace their flight pattern.

"Get that Nightmare!" Hiccup ordered. "Knock it out of the field like I did with you!"

Toothless didn't responded, but he went along with Hiccup as Hiccup had done with him. The Nightmare passed below them, lacking their agility.

**TEST ME! TEASE ME! YOU KNOW NOT—THIS PATH THAT LEADS TO COLD AND ROT!**

Hiccup ignored the booming voice. They spun out from under the open claws of a Timberjack who suddenly appeared from above and rocketed into the Nightmare's momentarily exposed back. It released a horrified squeal, not quite fast enough to keep track of the evasive dragon and human—not with its large, gawking body and a mind not fully its own.

It fell a large distance, catching itself close to the surface of the water. Hiccup couldn't be sure if it were out of the barrier or not.

"Again!"

They body checked the dragon once more, having a good head start to gather substantial speed. It released another yelp just before it went skidding hard into the ocean.

"Did it—?"

::Watch it:::

Hiccup reacted just in time to go along with Toothless' dive. The Timberjack that just tried to snatch at them tried to stop its flight in desperate, awkward movements, flapping those razor-sharp wings to its belly to keep from moving so much as a hair forward.

"That's the barrier, isn't it?" Hiccup gasped excitedly. "The exact—yes!"

Everything happened too quickly for him to feel that overwhelming horror any longer—they were away from the demon, they were at the barrier, and the flailing Nightmare below them crooned in a voice that could only be *its own*. They freed it!

"This one too!" he decided right there. How could he not? How could he ever turn away from a creature enslaved when freedom lay directly before?

Toothless made a quick ascension before spinning in a sharp turn and folding his wings back. Hiccup pressed himself flat against Toothless, lessening the wind resistance, joining together to create a sharp missile.

::Watch its wings::: Toothless warned before he body checked the Timberjack in the same manner as he had the Nightmare. His short, stocky neck was perfect for avoiding injury.

Timberjacks had a just as long of bodies as Nightmares, but far thinner. The Jack went sailing farther than their first target, managing to catch itself before hitting the water, but far too far out for it to continue its attack.

It shook its head as it hovered, whimpering loudly, glancing around—to Hiccup, to Toothless, to the Nightmare, with eyes that blinked incessantly.

"YES!" Hiccup cheered, his arms rising in the air without him realizing. His heart still pounded in his
ears from left over excitement, thrumming blood against his wrists and neck, but now the drain of using Framherja began to dawn on him.

**THWART ME ONCE, YOUR FORTUNE FINE!**

::No more, too many are coming:: Toothless warned. Hiccup glanced back to see a larger crowd of the lagging, dragon onslaught billowing towards them from the smoke.

"Right," he breathed. The heaviness of his limbs really started to settle in that brief reprieve of action. Hollowness dug at his chest. "Another time. Let's go!"

He didn't want to hear that voice any longer. He didn't want to be anywhere near that mist.

**TRY AGAIN—**

They flew away from the barrier and, as they left, the demon's voice—losing much of its anger in place of promise—grew fainter and fainter.

**YOUR SOULS...Are mine...**

By the time they made it to the land Toothless sensed before, Hiccup not only felt tired, but sick. Dizzy, heavy, sluggish, exhausted, and unable to breathe quite right.

He couldn't muster the proper excitement that the two dragons decided to follow them. The Timberjack at a wide distance, the Nightmare, once managing to bring itself to the air, stuck to Toothless' tail. They struggled in their flight, looking around as though unsure of where they were or where they were supposed to go and, upon landing, warbled and warbled until Toothless told them to shut up.

::I'll explain soon enough!:: He barked while Hiccup dismounted.

They were on an island to the North, possibly closer to Visithug territory than Berk's. Hiccup could have identified which one by looking around for a bit, but such a sickness came over him that his vision blotted. He coughed, his body shuddering, and he stumbled to some tall grass before the contents of his stomach spilled from his mouth.

**What? What's going on?**

Hiccup shuffled to the ocean shore, falling to his knees and cupping salty water into his mouth to clear the taste of sick from it. Thirst clawed at his throat. Trapped in a daze and only focused on feeling better, he turned to his pack without responding to find the waterskin, drinking deeply from the pouch the moment his hands touched it. Water dribbled from the corners of his mouth and he almost coughed it back up as his lungs continued to cry out against the poison they were subjected to.

He got careless—he became too enthralled with the situation, with escaping and then freeing those dragons. He didn't think of the consequences being human would cost him. Now he paid for it. Tainted by the essence of the demon, weakened by his unmeasured firing.
A hard head bumped Hiccup away from his effects; another knocked his canteen from his weak hold. Toothless continued to nudge Hiccup strongly until he was fully pushed to the ground. Then the dragon draped himself over top of his pitiful human.

"No, wait," Hiccup mumbled weakly. He pushed at Toothless' nose, trying to get to the two dragons that had followed them. "We have to—they—"

::They're fine:: Toothless insisted. He lifted a wing to give Hiccup a clear view of the tag-a-long, now more visible in the quickly lightening sky.

The Nightmare had curled itself into such a tight ball that Hiccup had to wonder how one could possibly appear so small. It's wings shelled over it so that it resembled a red boulder. The Timberjack was rubbing its murky-green hide against a tree, like an animal with an itch to be scratched.

Hiccup could scratch it—that would be a great way to befriend it—!

Toothless curled securely around him, dropping a wing over his head and stopping his muddled thoughts.

::Sleep::

Hiccup wanted to argue further. He wanted to make sure those dragons were, in fact, free from the demon's hold, that his theory of barriers and free wills was correct, but he felt too tired, too sick. His head spun and his vision swam, and he just wanted to get that disgusting 'essence' out of his body.

The temptation was too strong.

"M'kay," he finally let up. His eyes slipped shut and he burrowed into his dragon's warm side like a blind hatchling.

They'd deal with Berk tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

Yes. The demon talks. In rhymes. Tiny, tiny creepy tribute to the books.
Skulked

Chapter Summary

Hiccup contacts his father. Astrid and Fishlegs reflect on the war.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Skulked

Astrid's shoulder knocked against the heavy wooden door of the Mead Hall as she shuffled inside. The blunt stun hardly registered to her weary body, and she moved onward into the long-abandoned establishment unaffected. She didn't come for the food or the drinks—not that any would be served at this hour, with even the most outstanding sots having long since put to bed. Through the quiet and still village a salient glow emitted from the Hall which piqued her curiosity, and the noticeable absence of one man for the entirety of the day spurred her into climbing the steps against the protests of a leg wound.

She rubbed some dried blood off her chin, carelessly flittering the flakes from her fingers. Really, she just wanted a bath. She got her leg bandaged up from a lucky dragon's claw, got some food in her, and was put straight to work on rebuilding one of their barns all before the sun had fully risen. Though dead on her feet, Astrid's conscience insisted on seeking out her elusive friend before she could allow herself to lie down for a hard-earned rest.

Stiff legs took her to the only source of light within the Hall, betraying only the slightest discomfort in her limp.

A single candle atop a table teased the shadows stretching beyond its immediate reach, licking a large, hunched figure with its ambiance.

"Fish."

She needn't raise her voice, not when stone and wood tossed it so generously within the vast room.

Perhaps spurred by a new sound, Fishlegs muttered something to himself—unintelligible at this distance—and crossed something out on the parchment before him using a charcoal stick. She took several more steps forward until her good leg touched the corner of the table.

"Fishlegs."

The man's head snapped up, this time registering the presence of someone else. His eyes were wide enough for Astrid to see his pupils constrict sharply in the face of a more direct firelight.

"Astrid..." He blinked a couple times. "What are you doing here?"

If he were shocked at suddenly finding himself alone in the dark, he didn't show it. In fact, as soon as he acknowledged her company, his eyes went straight back to the scraps of sheepskin scattered before him.
"What are you doing here?" she threw back at him. She tossed one leg over the table's bench and seated herself across from him. A twinge in her thigh pulled from beneath her bandages, but it went ignored.

The young man released a long breath that somehow sounded like he just lost a very intense game. He tapped something right in front of him with a thick finger.

"Here. Right here."

Even if she read it right-side-up, Astrid knew she would make little sense of what he gestured to. There appeared to be symbols she'd never seen before, formulas of some sort, defacing every inch of the parchments. Dates and tallies and lines-crossing-lines to connect them all. She'd sooner call it witchcraft than logic.

"Here what?" She was tired. She wanted a bath. She didn't know why she came up here in the first place. Fishlegs was found, right where she suspected he'd be. He was alive and looking more haggard than those who actually fought in the raid the night before.

Okay, that part was concerning.

Fishlegs tapped that one spot again, his half-lidded eyes never wavering in their focus.

"I miscalculated...right here." His finger continued tapping, as though trapped in some morbid dance to remind him of his blunder.

No matter how much Astrid squinted her eyes, she knew the technical meaning of the symbols would be lost on her.

"I was wrong," Fishlegs murmured when she didn't immediately say anything. "I thought—they were supposed to—" The words wouldn't come to him. Frustrated, Fishlegs pulled his finger from its drum to run his hand through his hair. His helmet had been set on the table, and Astrid could see that he had been mussing up his hair quite often during his time spent in that seat. Much of the very short braid he had taken to wearing had come undone. "I figured tonight would have been the raid, not...not last...and we weren't..."

Then Astrid understood.

"Fish," she sighed, unsure of how to handle this in any sort of delicate manner. "Fish, it's fine—"

His hand slammed on the table—sudden, and faster than Astrid thought possible for the man. She heard a faint crack within the profound echo, evidence of a strength he rarely exhibited.

"It's not fine!" Fishlegs snapped, raising his voice to her for, perhaps, the first time in their lives. A forelock of blond hair fell into his face but it went ignored as he used his other hand to gesture wildly to the outside. "Look! Look at what happened! Seven percent casualties! Twenty percent drop in our food supply! Damages that could take weeks—weeks we don't have—! And it's because I—because —"

Again, words seemed to have escaped him. Astrid didn't so much as flinch at the atypical display of power.

"We were still more prepared than we would have been," she calmly reminded him. "We had already moved most of the livestock into the caves. We had more men on hand because we knew not to send out any expeditions."
The reason in the words punctured him, and the Ingerman legatee deflated just as fast as his temper came to him. He settled back into his seat, seeming to bear an even stronger aura of defeat. Astrid frowned at his behavior; at the way his shoulders sagged, buckling under a burden she could never understand. She could react in the moment; she could protect what was in front of her with strength and skill she had full control of. But predictions? Calculations? Having an entire village rely on so many unstable chances, interpreted only by her? That simply left too many opportunities to fail, to disappoint.

Fishlegs took on this responsibility—a responsibility so out of Astrid's element that she was glad she would never be considered for it. His forecasts were great when accurate, but when they weren't...

Now he understood the gravity of bearing this burden alone, of the consequences involved with failure—consequences that would only grow as Berk came to rely on him more and more. And, now, Astrid got to witness him fall apart under it.

Looking at the worry-etched crevices in his thinning face, Astrid wondered if Stoick realized the pressure this put her classmate under. They had all done their separate things—Snotlout with his training, Tuffnut with his excursions, and Ruffnut being dragged back and forth between matrons, yet always finding time to complain to Astrid or train for battle.

But Fishlegs stayed here—in this corner of the Mead Hall or in his family house—hunched over letters and notes and plots, growing paler by the day as stress wore him down at a pace to match the fall of their village.

The circumstances may be different, but Astrid remembered the resulting sensations well; the feeling of aiming too high and then watching her life slip out of control. The helplessness, the guilt, the rage...

She reached a hand across the table and rested it over top his charts. His lowered eyes riveted on the bloody-knuckled fist.

She really needed a bath.

"Fish," Astrid began softly. "I want to help—"

Already, he shook his head without wanting to listen to her.

"You can't—you... This isn't something you can help with. It would take too long to teach you; I have enough going on as it is. And you're needed outside—out there—"

"Have you been eating?" She interrupted, scrutinizing his appearance once his stammering of unfinished sentences exposed more of his body to the candlelight. It was not a healthy sort of weight loss that Astrid saw in his face. He looked uneven, saggy, with darkening bags under his eyes and a knot between his brows likely borne from grimacing too often.

"I dunno," was Fishlegs odd reply to the question. Disturbance returned to his features, and he scratched at his beard. "I can't think with all this going on...not about anything else. I just...I can't let this happen again. I need to triple—no—quadruple check my calculations from now on. This was unacceptable—"

"Fish!" Astrid barked, ceasing his sputters. She continued in a much softer tone, "Don't do this to yourself. We need you healthy."

Finally, finally, he looked at her. His shock at her words quickly morphed into a weak, apologetic smile to expose the premature lines around his mouth.
"I'm no fighter."

"We need your mind," Astrid immediately countered. She initially would have informed him that they had enough fighters—if that were still true. But Fishlegs had become valuable in a different manner. "You have become our best defense, do you realize that?"

The blond man snorted, wordlessly giving his opinion on that claim. Pride would not keep Astrid from elaborating on something she firmly believed.

"Your predictions, your charts...without them we would never prepare in time."

"But I—"

Astrid held up a hand. "You can't always get it right. We realize this, we do. Well, most of us."

Fishlegs sagged but Astrid paid no notice. "We're grateful for what you've given us. I'd hate to think where we would be right now without you."

Fishlegs remained rueful.

"I actually calculated that out, just for the Hel of it. It, uh—"

"You don't need to tell me," Astrid interjected. "I don't actually want to know."

The young woman stood, deciding that, while she couldn't quite ease Fishlegs' self-inflicted guilt this time, he would at least know his friends hadn't forgotten him.

"Get some sleep and join us tomorrow for drinks. We're gonna play horn toss."

He shook his head. "I don't have time—"

"Make time. It's important."

She knew. This was their life now. If they couldn't find fun in between raids then there'd be no fun.

"Take care of yourself," she said. "Take care of this." She rapped him on the head with her knuckles.

He winced at the sharp pain, massaging the spot with a scowl not of dissatisfaction, but of annoyance. Astrid managed to smile herself—a lighthearted scowl was a step in the right direction as far as she was concerned. She turned on her heel and headed home, her mind now focused on getting to a bed.

"Really, get some sleep," she threw over her shoulder before melting into the darkness beyond the doors.

Fishlegs stared after her for a short while.

"Yeah..." he finally mumbled, delayed.

His eyes burned in enervation and he found he had been re-reading the same notes without anything registering in his head. Maybe he did need a nap. His entire day had been spent in that corner, in that seat. He simply couldn't bring himself to go outside and help with repairs; shame kept him chained in the Mead Hall, pouring over past letters from correspondents, previous chartings of raids...anything to justify what happened.

He eventually found it—his mistake. It was an error he could not afford to repeat.
He continued to stare down at the papers, his own writing appearing more and more foreign to him. Frustration began to mount within him again. How could he protect their village in the only way he knew how if his good-for-nothing brain wouldn't work right? He figured out his mistake, but how could he prevent it from happening again? How could he keep up with the growing prevalence of attacks when it took him longer and longer to puzzle out his calculations?

"It's not enough," he groaned, running both hands through his hair. "It'll never be enough."

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Shadows were, arguably, the most important aspect of the night. They were perfect for concealment, people tended to avoid them, and when read correctly they behaved as omens of warning. Every movement, every subtle flicker, spoke to Hiccup loud and clear against the stillness of the night, and that's what got him so far into the village of Berk in the darkest, most quiet phase of the moon.

The layout of the village generally remained as he remembered it, though the number of houses in his memory had diminished. Hiccup could easily interpret the signs of a recent raid with so much of the village scorched and broken, and a hodgepodge of lumber and supplies piled around the land. Hopefully, that meant he had some time before the next one.

A shadow on the ground darkened and jumped. The elongating, sinister marks against the sparsely grassed soil warned Hiccup of a watchguard's approach long before the man passed. Hiccup spun mid-step and slithered around the back end of the structure he hugged—an unrepaired home, unroofed and blackened by fire. He didn't think about the fate of the family that once lived there; he had to focus on his mission and on not getting caught. The soft skin of his footwear molded lightly into the dirt to move him soundlessly out of sight, just in time for a night-guard to march by.

Hiccup's eyes followed the shadows of the ground until they receded enough for him to deem it safe to move again. He continued his route around the ruins, darting to a cleaner area the first chance he got. It wasn't safe near so much wreckage. He could easily step on some littered, hollow wood and give away his position.

Then again, it wasn't safe near erected homes either—where any night owl could glance out their window and squint through the night.

In truth, Hiccup wasn't too worried about that. He wore his darkest cloak and he carried himself too well to be caught by a village only accustomed to upfront attacks. He already made it from the lower edge of the forest, across the wooden bridge, and bee-lined straight through the center of the village—above the port, but below the chief's hill, and past several farmhouses. He covered the largest, most open spans of ground when heavy clouds moved across the moon. He stuck to the walls of the nearest building, favoring the backside of houses, staying away from doors and windows. He had been smart so far.

He had been lucky so far.

Now he faced off a final, rope-bridge that connected Berk to its closest, isolated seas tack—his destination right at his fingertips. Hiccup began to pad across it in much slower movements than the one he encountered earlier; moving any faster on a swinging bridge would only cause unwelcome clamor. He adhered to one side, stepping only where rope knotted beneath wood. He kept his weight lifted and away from the center of the boards—boards he knew suffered under great weight almost daily and would moan at the slightest bereavement. Despite his efforts, soundlessly travelling its
length proved impossible as every pressure beneath his foot elicited a squeak. Much pausing and
listening occurred over the period of crossing.

Thankfully, the bridge was short, and soon enough Hiccup's feet rested firmly and safely on a
narrow patch of grass. His eyes trailed up the reaching spiral of stone steps, carved into the stacked
rock by his forefathers and used as one of Berk's many watchtowers; admittedly, these watchtowers
served a more effective purpose during a time when baneful, seafaring neighbors were their greatest
issue.

Because this particular lookout was closest to the village—reachable by that one bridge—it provided
a more diverse purpose. If Hiccup's memory served him correctly, he should find a watch guard at
the top and what he was looking for.

The young infiltrator coasted up the stairs, using his hands to even out his weight, straining his ears
for the slightest hint of being followed and his eyes for any movement ahead. He reached the summit
of the steep islet in no time, and dove towards the lone, man-made structure. He pressed himself
against its tall foundation in a crouch, holding a hand to his mouth to make sure his breath was as
even as it sounded. Then he slowly straightened until the top of his head reached the crest of the half-
wall.

Hiccup took a moment to watch the shadows play on one of the eight pillars upholding the roof—
shadows delivered not by candlelight but by a free-sighted moon, broken by the ocean. When
nothing disturbed the mesmerizing pattern for a while, he risked peeking over the open-faced
structure.

A watchguard was there all right—his feet kicked up on the railing, balancing his weight on the back
legs of a chair. A horned helmet had been tipped forward to cover his eyes and a soft snore drifted
from a partially opened mouth.

Perfect. No one would have to be drugged this time.

With hands braced on the banister, Hiccup tightened his core and lifted himself up with an inhalation.
He paused again once his feet were planted next to his grip, balanced on a barrier and openly visible
to the guard should he wake.

The Viking gave a mighty snort and mumbled something about Bog Burglars.

Despite himself, Hiccup grinned. He hopped off the wall, his landing as silent as his arrival, and he
crept to the cages lining the wall behind the guard.

Nearly a dozen, beady eyes glared back at him from behind wooden bars. The rest of the messenger
hawks had their heads tucked under their wings. Hiccup lowered himself to a cage near the bottom—
one who's vacancy would be less noticeable—and chose a bird that already watched him. Startling a
hawk into wakefulness would only invite the opportunity for noise.

"'N' then yeh...with th' shackles please..."

Hiccup's shoulders seized at the words. Biting his lip, he glanced back at the guard, but the man had
moved neither feet nor helmet. Soon, the snores continued, and Hiccup was eased into realizing the
sudden speech could be blamed on sleep talking.

He released his lip to bite the inside of his cheek in a half-hearted attempt to keep from chuckling. He
returned to his task, his fingers unlatching the cage with some fumbles in the poor lighting. The cage
opened with a feeble whine. Both hands reached in, and Hiccup carefully brought the bird out with a
firm, but gentle, hold over is wings. Fortunately, the bird had been handled enough. It chirped at being touched but made no louder sound.

Hiccup repeatedly checked behind him through the entire process to make sure the guard didn't stir. Then he attempted to bag the hawk with a sack he had stuffed into his belt as delicately as he could without causing a commotion.

Unfortunately, the hawk was not as open to this idea of transportation. It cried out once the heavy material fell over its head; the bag bulged out in different areas as the trapped animal beat its wings from within.

"Shhhh...shhhh...!" Hiccup clamped down on his own panic, attempting to soothe the bird with the same calming aura that he used with dragons. His hands slowly closed in around the bagged creature, easing a more secure vice around its wings, but his wary eyes remained on the guard.

...Who could possibly be the worst choice for a guard in the history of bad guard choices.

If the guard did awaken, Hiccup was more than ready to throw caution to the wind and make a break for it.

The man didn't awaken, and eventually the bird did settle, either giving up on a bid for freedom or simply accepting its new setting for what it was. It released the occasional soft cry as Hiccup jostled it to stand.

The guard released another snort and muttered something else. A bandaged hand came up to wipe at his chin. Every movement from the Viking sent a painful thrill through Hiccup's heart. His blood pounded in his ears and throat so strongly he thought he might throw up, but he couldn't deny the excitement he felt from being so close to success—success that could just as easily escape him with the wrong move.

The bird rustled from within the bag and Hiccup knew he had to make a speedy escape before it lost its temper and really caused a racket. He crept back to the half-wall, quickly figuring out a smooth way of carrying the bird without disturbing it too much.

"Cammmmi...y-you..."

Hiccup stalled with one hand on the rail, the gently shifting bag tucked under the other. He turned to squint at the guard, sure he had heard wrong.

"...they...so big..."

Hiccup knew he had to leave. He got what he came for, undetected, and he could make an equally polished escape. Kicking the chair out from under the watch guard would be immature and impractical.

He stared at the visible jaw a little longer. He swore that he knew this guy from somewhere. He recognized that obnoxious birthmark staining the gullet of fat beneath his chin...even with meager visibility he could see it...

Good gods. Grody Gutterson.

Hiccup remembered now. The mace wielder, four years his senior, who always found it funny to pretend to lose control over his mace far too close to Hiccup's face. Hiccup still felt uncomfortable around spikes.
"Mmmm..."

The fat chops smacked a couple times. Some drool in the corner of Grody's mouth glistened in the moonlight.

The bag rustled and Hiccup knew he really needed to leave.

"...grabby grab...grab..."

Really. He should leave.

Grody's fingers begin twitching in a squeezing fashion.

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Toothless kneaded the ground with his claws, alternating paws, gouging the earth to express some of his agitation. The dark and quiet village had remained so for the duration of his everlasting wait. It was maddening.

How long did Hiccup expect him to just sit there, lying in wait? The boy nearly laid an egg when Toothless tried to make an argument for flying towards their destination. Hiccup made it quite clear that he didn't want Toothless anywhere near the village. Not even the skies were safe as far as the former resident was concerned.

So Toothless complied with the boundary Hiccup had laid down for him at the forest's edge with the promise to stay put, so long as Hiccup returned unharmed.

"I'll be back in a skip, Don't worry. It's not like they'll have changed the layout of the village. I can take care of myself..."

Yeah, care for himself straight into another weapon.

It took his boy nearly two full days to recover from the sickness that had followed him from the nest. Hiccup tried to leave the previous night but Toothless deemed him too pale, and postponed this "cunning plan" a full day.

They did, however, relocate to the cove whence their friendship started. This left their two tagalongs in the safety of Koltur—as Hiccup called it. An island that apparently lie just outside of the demon's reach.

Toothless believed for this to be best. The two dragons had their own recovery to undergo and Toothless would not risk Hiccup's safety if they suddenly lost their minds again. They seemed to be holding up fine—neither bore any crippling injuries and they could hunt and fly away to their content. Both, oddly enough, chose to stay on that island.

Though they shared an open curiosity about the human who chose to save them, something that predisposed them to Hiccup's affections, Toothless knew they suffered from a rebounding pride. One that filled them with a horrific comprehension he, himself, remembered all too well.

They would want their own revenge on the demon.

Toothless' ears perked at a promising sound: feet beating against the ground—barely audible to a
human, but familiar and wonderful and *approaching*. His eyes gleamed in the dark, catching Hiccup sprinting across a stone bridge, cradling a large sack in his arms.

Toothless bounced straight out of the trees and met Hiccup before the boy could take so much as three steps away from the bridge.

"We're good!" Hiccup whispered excitedly, easily ignoring the dragon snout that sniffed him head to toe.

::You're okay?:

"I'm fine!" Toothless could see Hiccup's eyes shining in a light only useful to creatures such as himself. Those freckled cheeks were flushed from the run and his hair looked a bit wild, but the smile on his face eased Toothless' own worries.

The human grimaced and prodded the bag. "I hope this guy is...

The bird had been unusually quiet for the end portion of his escape—around the time when he thought *to Hel with it* and decided to straight-out run to his dragon. He lost patience with the sneaking thing, fun as it may be.

The poke elicited a squawk from within and the burlap once more became animated.

::I still don't see why this was necessary:: Toothless commented. Hiccup swung himself onto the saddle, accidentally knocking the bird against Toothless' shoulder. He winced at its loud caw.

"I told you...I need to contact my father."

Something he realized he wasn't willing to do face to face. Not yet, anyway. It was a situation that simply left too much room for disaster, with or without Toothless in the picture.

::There are easier ways, I'm sure——:

"But I might need *constant* contact. Like...he'll reply, but then I'll need to reply to that reply, but he'll be waiting for me if I delivered the first note more personally...

Toothless snorted.

Hiccup pursed his lips. "Look, I don't want to take any chances with him. Who knows what his feelings are about...about all this," Hiccup gestured to himself and Toothless. "This way we can have a normal, acceptable correspondence, for as long as we'll need it to go on, until we reach an understanding. I just need to initiate it...since he doesn't know I'm around."

::And the bird is the best way to go about this?:

"Well, my first instinct was to send a Terror," Hiccup said seriously, "but I wasn't sure if he'd send it back."

::Yeah, I get it:: Toothless sighed. :::I suppose nothing disastrous happened this time:::

He didn't hear any shouts or alarms for the duration of Hiccup's absence.

"I told you it wouldn't," Hiccup grinned. He settled the agitated bird in his lap more securely. "Let's go!"

::Can I eat that when we're done?::
Stoick the Vast stretched his arms above his head and released a mighty groan to coincide with his popping back. He slept hard that night. A long battle followed by a day of repairs would send any man into a sound sleep.

He started his way down to the village square, one jouncing step after another. He felt good that morning, better than he could remember feeling in years. The damage wasn't too bad this time around, and they already made good progress in revival. Their most recent hunting trip procured enough kill to last them possibly a month if the meat held. They'd have to trade for salts and spices soon, but the immediate future looked about as positive as life on Berk could get...

"Repairs going all right?" Stoick asked his brother when his jaunt brought him to Spitelout's side.

The grayed brunette nodded, his fists resting on each hip as he surveyed the speedy repairs of the Hvalman household.

"Aye. Just about finished with this level..." Spitelout raised an eyebrow as he cast Stoick a sly look. "Slept in pretty late, don't you think?"

"Shut it you. I ain't as young as I used to be."

He swore he felt something pull around his lower spine when he grappled with that Zippleback.

"If you think that is an excuse, you are sorely mistaken."

Both brothers jerked when the wavering voice materialized right behind them, and bent their necks downward to find the village Elder smiling benignly.

"Morning ma'am," Stoick immediately greeted.

"Elder," Spitelout nodded out of respect, though his brow furrowed.

The little old woman laughed without reserve.

"All the tracking skills in the world cannot compete with a lifetime of skulking!"

"How can you be so sprightly?" Stoick voiced. His back still felt sore from whatever he did to it two nights ago. If he were on a downward spiral into elderhood, he couldn't imagine ever being so cheerful as that in twenty years.

"Och! She's great if her aim is anything to go by!" their resident blacksmith growled, trailing a good pace behind the Elder. Gobber favored his peg leg, precariously hopping on the tapered wood more than he would step on his left foot.

The Elder sniffed. "Maybe you will learn not to throw old brine in the path of a poor, elderly woman."

"He probably couldn't hear you coming," Spitelout offered for his friend, but a smile had wormed its way over his face.
"Aye," his brother spoke up with a wink. "The consequences of a lifetime of skulking."

Gobber shuffled up to their group. "Yeah, yeah...consequences of skulking. In that case, I doubt we'll notice when she skulking croaks—"

The Elder rapped him on the leg with her cane for what would be the second time that morning.

"Ach! Woman! I only got one leg!"

Spitelout slapped Gobber upside the head.

"Respect the Elder."

"But she—"

"I am just ensuring that my death will be a cause for celebration rather than mourning," the Elder justified with black humor. "I expect the only the finest ale to be served, and for my pyre to consist of Aspen wood. I want my amber amulet around my neck and my silver one in my hand. I want my three gold torcs around my wrist; the fourth one—my daughter will know—will go to my youngest grandchild. And I want there to be dancing! There better be more than just my pyre lit."

The men took a moment to stare at her.

"You've been planning this for a while, haven't you?" Stoick deadpanned.

"Hey!" The party of four turned to see Tuffnut Thorston marching by, shouldering one end of a timber stack with the other side held up by his sister. "This village isn't going to rebuild itself, y'know!"

He didn't wait for a response; he kept on walking with his sister harping at his back.

Stoick's eyebrows rose, "Uppity little—"

"Och. He's just annoyed that the hunting party got postponed," Gobber waved. "And a good thing too. Can you imagine if we didn't have enough men? That woulda' been—"

The piercing call of a hawk punctured Gobber's words. The men craned their necks to see Tuffnut Thorston marching by, shouldering one end of a timber stack with the other side held up by his sister. "This village isn't going to rebuild itself, you know!"

He had gotten better since his son's departure. His focus on the village and on this fiasco of a war helped stabilize him against the inner upheaval of emotions; it allowed him to put Hiccup's actions to the back of his mind so the rest could move forward. When he did think of Hiccup, he tried to think only of that last letter they received nearly a year ago. Hiccup gave them a note worthy of a chief-in-training: diplomatic, neutral, and opening a world of possibilities to further explain his abandonment.

On a good day, Stoick could even make the argument that Hiccup had helped their village.

"What's it say?" his brother asked quietly from his side.
Stoick swallowed and read the entirety of the note aloud.

"Stoick of Berk...I write to you to inform you that I've returned to the Archipelagoes. My research on this war is both extensive and thorough, and I have recently made some alarming discoveries that I feel you need to know about. I've been to the nest—" here, Stoick had to pause. "I've seen this demon that controls the dragons. It does not look good for the Vikings. I request a meeting to discuss these discoveries on neutral ground, and that we might find a way to work together to defeat this thing. I hope we can form a temporary truce. It only has to hold for the duration of the war, and then we can go our separate ways. Please reply with haste. Hiccup."

"Wow," Gobber muttered when Stoick did little more than stare at the letter after finishing his read. "Wow."

He couldn't quite think of anything else to say.

"Aye..." Stoick whispered.

"This here is heavy stuff," the smith settled on.

"Again, he doesn't sound feral," Spitelout added. "Still using that brain of his. He's even got himself a messenger hawk..."

"Does he now?" the Elder spoke up, reminding the men of her presence. She stared at the bird with high eyebrows.

Spitelout followed her gaze to the marker strapped around its scaly leg—the claim of property. The Berkian-red tag.

He blinked. "Er...is that ours?"

The men all leaned closer to the hawk. There was no mistaking it; they had each used this particular hawk before—several times.

"How did he...bugger!" Gobber swore. "He was in our village?"

"Or he has a contact here who sent him he bird," Spitelout offered. "Though...the bird would have to be introduced to him again for that to be remotely useful..."

"Either way...he's close," Stoick murmured, troubled by the very idea of Hiccup's presence in their village.

His brother shook his head.

"Riding a dragon?" said Spitelout. "He could easily hop the islands. Could be halfway back to Shetland by now."

Gobber went on muttering. "What was the daft fool thinking? He could have been attacked! The little shite..."

Stoick ignored Gobber's ill-hid worries over Hiccup's wellbeing in the face of an outlaw infiltrating their village for thievery because, despite himself, he felt that same, initial concern.

"Call a meeting."
"You can't be serious!" Hoark cried, always the traditionalist. "After what he's done to us? You're actually thinking of—"

"What's he done exactly?" Gobber broke through. "Warned us not to waste our time searching for the nest? Gave us some insight to the mechanics behind this war?"

"Certainly didn't deprive us of a dragon fighter," Ack rumbled, winning a few chuckles and a few more frowns.

"Which hasn't been proven!" a voice hollered from the back in response to Gobber's defense.

"He says he can though!" another argued back.

"Enough!" Stoick growled, and silence fell over the entire gathering. "Look at us! Look at what we've become!"

Those present did so. The gathering was far larger than the usual Thing, but that was because every one of the fighting sort were present. This was all they had left for a defense.

Stoick followed his own advice, finding more difficulty in spotting fellows of his age with every meeting. The seasoned warriors of their tribe helped them greatly in keeping Berk afloat, but the younger generation were more able-bodied—they survived, learning how to fight dragons in the most cutthroat manner possible, and fast. Soon enough, they would surpass their parents.

At Stoick's right stood his most trusted counsel—his brother, the Elder, his best friend...

But it was his to his left that he turned. This was where he kept the future of their village—his nephew, the Ingerman boy whose logic proved just as valuable as any well-wielded blade, and the Hofferson lass, with whom he saw himself in the more he scrutinized her. Ironic, considering her hand in the removal of his son.

He watched as young Astrid arose from her depression using the same crutch as he—the war. She relied on image and example to lead her peers, and it worked. She trusted their system of government; she put the good of the whole before the individual...how had he not see the similarities before? He should have adopted the lass; she was the child he wished Hiccup had been.

Snotlout, he continued to hold reservations for. The boy was trying, Odin knew it, and he had made leaps and bounds with redefining himself—even if pure, selfish ambition clearly drove him. But the boy could still be manipulated. Somewhere in Stoick's mind, the idea that Astrid could take over the village continued to niggle.

Pity. If they hadn't already made that contract with the Bogs it would have been a perfect way to get her into power. But he was willing to cut his losses in that area and simply let her do what she did best—protect.

"Fishlegs," the sound of his own voice shocked Stoick, and he quickly remembered where he was. He turned to the large man, who's fingers seemed to have spasmed tightly around the clutch of papers at the sound of his name.

"Er—"

"Take the floor son," Stoick gestured to an open spot besides him. "I'd like to hear your take on this."
"Second," Astrid called out. Fishlegs stared at her, bewildered, and she smiled.

"Aye!" Someone else shouted from across the table, and from there more voices raised, all calling for Fishlegs' opinion.

The young man stiffly accepted the call. He walked to the forefront of the gathering, positive that everyone could see him shaking. This wasn't the first time he'd had been asked to speak up at the Thing, but he still felt that senseless, crippling fear every time he fell under the scrutiny of so many eyes.

This fear whispered things to him—tried to freeze the blood in his legs from spurring him forward, tried to force him back into the solitude where he belonged. It tried to remind him that _he didn't fit here_. He didn't deserve this authority to make decisions for the good of his village. He was a farmer's son, and he was a coward.

How had it spiraled into this? A simple project bred from curiosity turned into a driving factor behind his village's defense strategies. All because Hiccup's actions—leaving the village, and on a dragon no less—seemed so _outlandish_, that Fishlegs couldn't possibly leave well enough alone. Treasonous as his thoughts might have been, the blond felt Hiccup might have been onto something...a key in these raids that went previously undiscovered. He began charting dragon attacks and frequencies, sent out inquiries to other villages known to suffer attacks. He talked to sailors about their widely reached knowledge, slowly marking out a disturbing pattern with all the data collected.

Naturally, he deemed it best to keep his studies under wraps for fear of being outlawed like Hiccup.

That had always been a fear of Fishlegs'—a shameful, dirty fear that left him too weak to stand up to popular opinion, but just strong enough to ignore the loneliness he saw in the eyes of an old, childhood friend.

But when his intelligence became too much to keep to himself, Fishlegs gathered all the courage he had in his body and brought it to the attention of the chief. And that's when the responsibility began to pile up.

The situation terrified him, but Fishlegs sucked in his gut and met the challenge head on. Because his data got him premature access to Things, and he learned that Hiccup was still trying to help their village in his own, peculiar way. Hiccup was still being Hiccup—socially unacceptable and persevering. Two qualities that he avoided and lacked respectively.

This would be his contribution to his village. He had the size of a Berserker, but he didn't have the heart of one. He wasn't like Tuff or Ruff or Astrid. They'd start bellowing one moment and lose themselves to the movement in the next. Fishlegs had trouble attacking dragons ever since dragon training, when he looked into that Zippleback's eyes and saw intelligence gleaming back at him. He couldn't work up the sheer rage and aggression needed for that state of mind. His mind was destined for a different purpose.

This would be his redemption—for every time he stood on the sidelines and did _nothing_.

"W-well according to my charts—and these I've checked multiple times, mind you—we are on what I would call a 'downward spiral'. They'll be attacking more and more often and eventually our recovery won't be able to keep up. I...," he turned his eyes downward, "estimate a total annihilation within a year."

That got an ill-favored response. Gasps wove around the gathering like the very spiral Fishlegs spoke of.
"If...if Hiccup has more information this can increase our chances of survival exponentially," Fishlegs continued in a slightly louder voice that quieted most of the mutterings. "Need I remind you, he has helped us before. We would only have a fraction of you here with us now if we continued with the nest hunts." And now his voice gained strength. "I know because I made my own predictions regarding that using the average number of persons missing of past expeditions, and factoring in the increase of dragons spotted during..." he stopped when he realized no one actually cared how he figured this out. "A-anyway, his information of the past has helped us before, and I believe we are in no position to decline his offer of a truce. We can only benefit from this, and... and we can no long afford to be picky about where we get help."

Astrid leaned against a wooden pillar with her arms crossed, content to blend into the shadows as Fishlegs slowly turned the minds of those opposed to the idea. Though she had known about his hand in helping the village for weeks, it still amazed her to see how far Fishlegs had come. She used to shake her head at him back when they were kids—back when he would run screaming from anything with sharp teeth, refusing to use the powerful body he had been gifted with.

As an older man, Fishlegs knew better than to put himself in situations like that. He focused on his strengths—even if they weren't the traditional sort—and he made himself useful. Astrid found she could respect him for that.

She only wished that she could figure herself out as her peers came into their own. No one had tried to pursue her in weeks, and her damned wishy-washy mind was once more than thankful. Did she still experience the odd feelings of being left behind? Yes. But ever since discovering the dark truth behind the war, Astrid's deeper involvement in their defense spiced things up again—it filled some of that emptiness inside her. These predictions gave a sense of progress. She felt less a pawn and more a player. As she deserved to be.

Still, that confusion regarding what she truly desired for herself continued to torment her every now and then—popping up whenever she had too much time to introspect and teasing her for failing to understand her own heart. She wanted to be great at everything. They were Vikings—Berkians—where they fought and married...and then they fought some more. Astrid was suited just fine for the fighting part, but her heart pulled when she saw everyone taking the next step in their lives while she stayed still—like they were growing up without her. Marriage, children...theses were milestones she was expected to cross, and her expectations for herself dictated that she meet every expectation and beyond.

She feared the twisted combination of expectations, inadequacy and obligation drove this aimlessness, because when she really stepped back, when she took out tradition and prospect and everything her village represented, she swore her heart wasn't fully into the idea of a settled life. Once upon a time, perhaps. But now...

Unfortunately, these were factors that influenced her future. She wouldn't abandon her village. She couldn't set aside these expectations or ignore tradition. It wasn't in her nature. She wanted Berk to be proud of her. When Berk was proud of her she was happy.

So Astrid continued her struggle with figuring out how to manage what she wanted—if she even knew what she wanted—while her village fell to ruin.

Sometimes she was grateful for the war. She could focus on at least one thing she loved, and it had given her an excuse to escape every offer for her hand so far.

Other times, she dreaded the day when it all ended—in or out of their favor.
"So we're in an accord?" Stoick's bellow jerked Astrid from her meditation. She completely missed what they were agreeing on.

The room roared back in a series of 'aye's. She caught Fishlegs shuffling backwards from the spotlight, still looking pale, but also relieved.

"Then it's agreed. We'll meet with him," Stoick decided, and his face remained so unreadable, so unmoved by what was surely a crippling verdict, that Astrid wondered how they would ever find a chief to replace him. "Until further notice, no one is to harm Hiccup should they encounter him."

Despite her knowing it would be the best, logical move Berk could make, Astrid felt her stomach drop. It looked like Hiccup would be returning to Berk, and conceivably with a suspended outlaw. They would face each other again after such a bitter parting and there wasn't much she could do about it. He had intelligence that could possibly save their village, information no one could ever acquire before. He betrayed their village in the process, but because Fishlegs vouched for him, it was going to happen. He would return.

Her eyes chose that moment to seek out the broad shoulders of the blond as he moved with the flow of the crowd. He stood at least a head taller than most surrounding him, he could easily shove his way to the front, but instead he allowed for his body to be knocked around, stuttering apologies.

Astrid shook her head.

When did the two losers of their generation become the two most influential?

Chapter End Notes

Hey, I did say he'd be back in Berk, didn't I? ;)

I'm not a fan of reading introspection, so I apologize for making you do so. There's a lot of it and it's a sad consequence of focusing so much on the boys for most of the story; its my way of summerizing the limited growth we get to see in the Berk kids.

Now, did Hiccup do anything to Grody? The world may never know.

Face to face meetings next time, for reals. Scout's honor.
Hiccup finally sees his father for the first time in years.

Astrid finds herself in a disturbingly familiar situation.

::Are you going to read it?::

"Yes!" Hiccup snapped. Reading the response from his father would prove very difficult if he didn't first unroll it. The scroll remained in his fist a moment longer.

"...Eventually."

::The worst he can say is 'no'::. 

Hiccup closed his eyes.

"And then...we look to the Meathead clan for support..."

Thuggory had probably taken over by now—Hiccup recalled chief Mogadon as ill two years back. Thuggory was, if anything, an opportunist for power and respect. Brawny, bold, loud, not inclined to think... the Meathead heir was so much like Snotlout that the two boys simply couldn't get along as children. Some days Hiccup suspected the only reason Thuggory ever stuck up for him was to rile up Snotlout. That and Camicazi nearly ripped Thug's ear off the first and last time he tried to push Hiccup around.

Thankfully, Snotlout had outgrown some of his more ignoble qualities by the time they made it into dragon training—he certainly stopped seeking out Hiccup to shove the smaller boy in the mud. Hiccup didn't know how Thuggory had turned out over the years, but—if cast from the same mold as Snotlout—Hiccup did know he would need all of Berk backing him, possibly some other tribes as well, before Thuggory would take orders from the likes of him.

Hiccup released a heavy breath in a silent whistle and his fingers finally unfurled the message. He scanned the contents first, his eyes seeking out what he needed to hear before his mind would register any details.

"They'll meet us!" He felt more consolation at the words than he anticipated. Hiccup reread the letter, carefully this time. "They're willing to allow me immunity—good. They want me to come to the docks...tch! That's not going to happen. Fancy an axe in your skull?"

::Not the face::: Toothless stipulated. Hiccup grinned through the hold his teeth had on his lip and nudged his friend.
"Vanity. So how are we going to do this?" He didn't know who he directed the question to—himself or Toothless. He continued his chew on his lip in thought, staring at the slant of his father's runes. "If we...oh! Okay, okay. I know—I got it. I mean, we need to have that ground advantage, right?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Right. They're going to be armed no matter what we request. If they did recreate the bola launcher we may even be in danger in the air—"

Toothless snorted. Hiccup held up a hand.

"I'm just saying. We need an area where they'll have to travel light...where we'll feel safe..."

Hiccup began to glance around himself.

Toothless reacted with alarm.

::You're not bringing them here are you?:

"What?" Hiccup reeled back. "No! I'm thinking higher—where we're safest...oh!" His head turned north and he squinted at the shaded outlines of distant mountains. "We could...the hof—Yes!"

::Hof?::: Toothless cocked his head. ::What is this 'hof'?::

"Shrine," Hiccup tossed back in his distraction. He continued facing north, focusing on the scope of treetops. "It'll be perfect... They'll have to climb a ways—won't be able to bring heavy weapons, and we can fly to the top... we'll have the advantage then. Yes, yes, that's perfect!"

Toothless swished his tail along the dirt, watching in bemusement as Hiccup threw himself to the ground to start scribbling out a note.

::So...it's the shrine?:

"Uh huh," Hiccup bit the end of his writing utensil in a fleeting moment of deliberation. "And dad—Stoick, Stoick—can bring his second." He scratched out the rest of his terms, no longer bothering with cultivated jargon, and signed his name with a flourish. "There!"

Hiccup sat back on his knees and read the contents of his reply over. Satisfied, he gave a short nod of approval before he tied the letter closed with the same string.

::I still think you're being too complicated with all this::

"No, I'm not," Hiccup insisted. "This is necessary, trust me. We need help and we have to do this right the first time, because we don't have any time. We need strong foundation for this...truce or whatever. Besides, I think we're off to a good start."

The boy did, in fact, look inordinately pleased with himself. Toothless could just picture the mental back-patting his human was giving himself.

Hiccup pushed himself from the ground, grunting, and brushed off the front of his pants.

"Perfect," he said. "Now all we have to do is wait for his agreement, meet him, and get this ball rolling."

Toothless perked up, earplates standing at attention. ::Ball? What ball?:

"It's a figure of speech," Hiccup muttered. Truthfully, he wasn't quite sure himself how this ball would roll. His fingers felt surprisingly jittery as they fumbled with the red tie. The hawk—a creature intelligent enough to recognize Hiccup as the human who bagged it—was not patient. It nipped
Hiccup's knuckle the second he finished attaching the note before it took flight.

"Mother—!" Hiccup cut off the rest of his own exclamation by putting the bleeding cut in his mouth. He glared at the diminishing outline of the messenger, his mind grappling to hold onto that indignation for as long as possible. Anything to stave off the subsurface anxiety clawing under his skin, the fear of seeing his father again, squeezing his stomach so hard he thought he might vomit.

Toothless slunk up to Hiccup's side.

::And after the ball rolls...then will we be done with the bird?::

"You're not eating it!"


"Look at all these demands!"

"Hoark..."

"Who knows how many dragons he'll have with him!"

"Hoark, that's enough."

"This could be a trap," Spitelout offered quietly. Stoick turned his agitated glower on his brother. The brunet shrugged, unapologetic. "We need to consider the likelihood, is all."

"Going through a great deal of trouble for this trap, inne?" Gobber cut in. "Coming back here and all...back into a war. He didn't have to—"

"Do not let your prejudice get in the way of your judgment," Spitelout said. Gobber rested a hand and hook on his hips. "And what's that supposed to mean?"

"You have a history with the lad, is all. You're not hiding your acceptance of his return very well."

The blacksmith snorted at the insinuation, the choppy hairs of his mustache ruffling over his lip. "You didn't have a problem asking to speak with him, either!"

"Because he can help us. That was before he asked to put us at a disadvantage. This isn't—"

"Enough!" Stoick ordered. He pinched bridge of nose and repeated, softer, "Enough."

Did Hiccup realize what he was asking? To meet with an outlaw and a dragon at their highest place of worship? The closest they could get to the gods...

It was an area for the vǫlva to ask the gods for favors and blessings. Not for political alliances and...and spitting on tradition.

Stoick knew why Hiccup chose this. It would give the boy plenty of means to fly off if things didn't appear in his favor. They would have to work to get there—carry minimal, portable weapons to cross the narrow paths spiraling up the cliffs. The conditions were every bit as cautious as he recalled his son being. But smart also, and akin to leadership.
Why couldn't Hiccup have shown this sort of diplomacy and command back when he was his son?

The pressure of several stares prickled his skin, and Stoick lifted his eyes from Hiccup's latest message to find everyone waiting on his judgment.

"We'll bring more men," he decided on the spot, feeling rushed under the strain of his council and his own restlessness, "but agree on the location."

No immediate reaction followed.

Ack cleared his throat first. "Er...a bit sacrilegious, don't you think? Having a dragon there?"

Stoick was already writing his answer on a fresh square of sheepskin, concise and apt.

"We don't have the time, nor I the patience, to haggle over where to meet him. He's not going to show up in a place so exposed as our docks...I want to get this over with. We're just going to have to go into this with a little faith."

He sent the hawk off before he even finished his explanation, taking away the option for any more dispute on the matter. He did want to finish this—finish this game of cat and mouse, finish this war.

He wanted to see his son.

The final reply returned far sooner than they thought possible, all formality lost.

"It just said: 'Acceptable. Sundown'."

"That's it?" Ruffnut deadpanned, unimpressed with Snotlout's covert news. She swirled the rest of her drink in her mug, looking tremendously bored. "Two words? That could mean anything."

"But where?" Fishlegs asked over her. "What was acceptable?"

"I'm...not allowed to say." Snotlout winced, and he looked sincerely apologetic at not being able to share the information. Only those meeting with Hiccup were allowed the details and, as future chief, Snotlout had the honor of accompanying the current chief on this diplomatic mission.

Being partial to such information once called for boasting, but the glory of becoming chief lost its shine every approaching day of his coronation. Snotlout found with more responsibly came the desire of having people he trusted at his back, friends he could share the burden with. He had gotten so used to having some of his peers at his side—almost like his own council—that learning neither Fishlegs nor Astrid would operate with him made the honor slightly hollow. He felt less in control, and more like a child expected to hold his tongue and observe an adult matter.

"So it's set?" Astrid asked just after shredding the last, meaty threads from a turkey bone. "The correspondence is finished? We just have to meet him now?"

Snotlout shrugged again. "Sounds like it."

Astrid nodded as she ran a tongue over her teeth, cleaning off any excess food. Her stomach churned at the thought of going to Hiccup for help, of him back in their village, when those feelings of resentment and frustration towards him still lingered in her breast. It made eating rather difficult, but
she wasn't stupid enough to deprive her body of nutrients. Not in these days where she may be expected to fight at a moment's notice.

"They received the bird way too fast..." Fishlegs murmured. He had pushed his food aside as soon as Snotlout returned from a privileged-only meeting, choosing instead to continually rub his beard in contemplation. Astrid narrowed her eyes at his neglect but said nothing. "Two letters and all before náttmál?"

"Phrree," Tuffnut squelched around a mouthful of bread. He swallowed the lump roughly. "He wrote the first letter yesterday, remember?"

Fishlegs waved away the correction.

"Yes, but that could have come from anywhere. His responses to our letters were fast. Especially that last one."

"We hadn't even finished our meeting and it was suddenly there," Snotlout supplied. Fishlegs gave him a pointed nod.

"Exactly. He's close. Very close. He could be watching us right now."

Despite being seated indoors, the group of friends all took a moment to glance around their table, as if expecting Hiccup's face to pop out from behind one of the Mead Hall's stanchions.

"Okay, did anyone else just get the insane urge to do something obscene?" Tuffnut asked to no one in particular.

"How is that different from your normal urges?" his sister heckled.

"You guys," Astrid started warningly. "I'm not in the mood."

She didn't know if she ate some bad meat or if Hiccup's return really bothered her this much. She felt...unsettled; it was the best word she could use to described the worming state of her insides. Her hand pushed against her bare forehead, hoisting her bangs.

Ruffnut rolled her eyes, resting a cheek on her palm. "You're never in the mood."

"I gotta go," Snotlout muttered, glancing beyond the great doors of the Hall. Astrid followed his line of sight, to where the first chrome of vermillion grazed the bellies of clouds.

"Why would he want to meet you at the end of the day?" she murmured. Now that she thought about it, sundown seemed an odd time for a meeting. If negotiations dragged on for too long they'd be speaking in the dark.

"He rides a Night Fury, Astrid..." Fishlegs began, giving her ample time to catch on before he finished. "The night? It's probably a safety precaution for himself."

Slightly embarrassed that hadn't occurred to her, Astrid chose to narrow her eyes at the blond.

"Eat your food."

Fishlegs opened his mouth to respond when Snotlout spoke over him.

"We should be back before then," he announced. As he stood he snagged the bottom end of the bread Tuffnut had been working on, before jogging away from the Thorston's swipe.
"OI!" Tuffnut howled.

"I need this more than you!" Snotlout hollered from the other end of the Hall. "I'll be negotiating."

Tuffnut couldn't be bothered to get up from his seat, so he continued to yell his indignation.

"You'll be watching you daft—ugk!" A fresh, fat roll had been shoved into Tuffnut's mouth so hard he thought he'd have choked on his own tongue. He glared at his cackling sister with watering eyes and wrenched the bread from his mouth.

"What the hel—"

The bench scraped against the stone floor at an attention-grabbing pitch. The twins were jostled as Astrid pushed back from the table, standing and leaving her own half-finished plate.

"Wha—?"

"Hey!"

"I'm going for a walk," Astrid informed the remaining three without turning around for any other sort of self-pardon.

Fishlegs sat up straighter. "Do not follow them, Astrid."

Astrid spun on her heel, still backing towards the exit.

"I'm nooot," she drawled. She turned back around, appearing to follow in Snotlout's wake.

"You're not allowed! The chief will—"

"Eat your food!"

########################

"This feels a little wrong, now that I'm here," Gobber observed nonchalantly. He turned his gaze from one staked cow skull to another. "I think it's just occurred to me that we're holding a meeting on sacred grounds."

The gathering of men stood, outside, amidst a circle of hörgr and bone, keeping to the flattest surface of the high station, plodding around the loose dirt in tense waiting.

Spitelout turned a flat stare on the blacksmith, but said nothing. He rarely needed words for expression.

"So where is he?" Snotlout asked. The sun was still a ways from touching Midgard, but the sky had saturated in enough color to be considered sundown.

Not once since arriving did Stoick cease scanning the skies. He would develop a crick in his neck soon enough, and that would make him irritable during his encounter with his lost son. This meeting wasn't off to a good start.

"He was always late coming in to the shop," Gobber reminisced. He didn't speak of it as a dirty habit, but as an irrefutable fact. "We might as well make ourselves comfortable, 'cause we could be
in for a long—"

Wind and darkness shot up from behind a tall slab of rock used for sacrificial animals—a salient shadow, little more than an outline amidst a darkening sky, clogged the rest of Gobber's words. Its silent and unexpected appearance seemed oddly loud in the sheer power of its presence; it caught the attention of all men in attendance. They watched as the form curved in the air like the cresting pounce of a wild cat and landed on the highest stage of their shrine with deadly talons.

Weapons found their way into hands as the men fell into defensive stances, but none could bring themselves to move further. Equal measures of effort went into battling down the instinct to attack and accepting the picture of a human riding a dragon.

The magnificence of a Night Fury radiated in the flexing of those sinister wings and the burn of those acrid eyes. It settled from its loom, coming to all fours and revealing its passenger—a lean, young man that looked just as much a part of the dragon as its own scales. This could have been the matching armor, or it could have been the shared mannerisms seen the in cynical regard to the humans below them.

Hiccup slid from the saddle, but separated himself no further from his dragon. One arm braced against the shoulder of the beast while another had risen to rub the creature's hide in soothing circles. He moved his eyes across faces and blades, silently counting his breaths and heartbeats in an attempt to keep his head. He was doing it; he was back in the presence of Berkians and he would not lose his composure.

Four husky Vikings craned their necks to meet eyes with a dragon and its rider, and for a long while only staring ensued. Silent evaluations, shock...inner turmoil no one dared reveal in expression.

The two Jorgensons, while obviously trying to swallow the image of Hiccup the Useless looking rather competent in stance and dress, kept finding their attention drawn to the once-invisible dragon. Gobber, too, found his attention torn: the Night Fury—center to so many of his wild tales, his apprentice—taller, healthier than he ever imagined, and the craftsmanship of that pulley system, the off-colored tail that clearly was a prosthetic to his trained eyes, those arm-bracers...

The boy had obviously learned the same trade from different masters, and Gobber listed another reason to allow Hiccup into the village.

Faced with a damnable Night Fury and Stoick the Vast couldn't seem to tear his eyes from his son's face. Hiccup—suddenly he was his son again, because he had his brow, the reach of his jaw, and the same curve to his lips. But Valka's eyes. Those were his wife's eyes staring back at him. Her cheekbones, her nose, her hair...

Stoick tried to be discreet when he grabbed at the rock ridge by his side. A sense of vertigo had taken hold of him and it had nothing to do with their elevation. Suddenly, they were both there. For one breath, for one timeless, indescribable moment, Stoick felt like his family came back to him.

Hiccup moved first with a slow nod of greeting, his face unreadable.

"Stoick."

His voice carried over to the men and it did the job of shaking them from their stupor. Stoick cleared his throat.

"Hiccup." Once upon a time he wanted to wring this boy's neck for all he had done. He couldn't so much as find the words to continue, let alone twitch a finger in his direction. Hiccup now carried a
weapon, for Odin's sake—one he could have never imagined, let alone seen before. He'd swear on his own axe that it glowed. "You...you're..."

"Still alive?" Hiccup supplied, unhelpful with his verbal quips as everyone present recalled. The young man appeared to struggle with something in the silence that followed. He ended on turning his attention to his cousin. "Hey 'Lout."

"Hey," Snotlout said reluctantly. Hiccup was still considered an outcast for all intents and purposes; he was not a member of Berk and therefore ineligible to take the chiefdom from him.

But he looked like he could be a chief, and that made Snotlout uncomfortable.

"I'm going to be chief," he blurted out... then dearly hoped it sounded far less churlish than it did to his own ears. From the corner of his eye, Snotlout he saw his father give him a warning look.

He focused on Hiccup's reaction, which proved rather disappointing with his one nod.

"Good," Hiccup stated, and while that one word carried no insincerity, Snotlout could not find comfort in it. Hiccup's outlaw status was about to be temporarily suspended. If his information did win this war, would it also win forgiveness? Would it win his birthright back?

"Och!" Gobber bellowed, waving an axe-headed arm in the air. "Can you not see me?"

A smile stretched across Hiccup's face, more genuine than any expression he had revealed yet.

_That_ was when reality bore down on Stoick, cleaving through the surreal image of Hiccup haloed in a painted sky. Something lurched in his belly, something that had been, until now, consciously suppressed by a trained calm. This was an adult—the way Hiccup's cheeks contorted and lined around the grin, the deepening of his voice, his stance and reservation towards them. Hiccup had grown up. Up. He was alive and he had done well for himself and he spoke to them as one would an equal. He met their eyes, he didn't curl inward—he appeared every bit as impressive as the dragon he arrived on.

Stoick cursed his distraction, detesting the hitch in his breath that betrayed his slipping command on the situation. Now was not the time to lament a lost son who grew up better under a devil than he could have ever hoped to raise him.

"You're hard to miss," Hiccup stated wryly to Gobber's exclamation. "Packed on a bit of weight, haven't you?"

He directed his sight to Gobber's midsection, where the gut had begun to extend over his pant-tie a little more each month. An easy warmth returned to his features as he poked fun at his old master.

Gobber patted the area of jest.

"You can only dream of managing a figure like this, someday."

Hiccup shook his head, fondly remembering the ease at which he and Gobber could exchange banter. The translation of the words they just shared read as clear to him as if the last two years never happened.

_I can't believe you left. I'm glad you're alive._

Hiccup seemed to have been growing more comfortable up until that slipup. Spitelout didn't react to it other than a return greeting.

"This is Toothless," the boy went on, attempting to wrap up this greeting segment with a final introduction. He gave the dragon another pat on the neck. "This... well, this is what a Night Fury looks like."

The pupils within the acid-green eyes tapered. Toothless huffed and a wisp of smoke spiraled from each nostril.

"Knock it off," Hiccup hissed. He grinned, this time more nervous, and Stoick finally saw some of the son he remembered. It gave him the familiar stability he needed to proceed.

"You say you have information regarding this demon," Stoick began, jumping straight to the point. "And that you've been to the nest." A claim that both terrified and intrigued the former father. "What can you tell us that will give us the edge we need to finish this war?"

Hiccup wet his lips and nodded. He risked taking a step away from his dragon to stand at the edge of the high rock they perched on.

"I...I can't even begin to describe what I know." He glanced back at the dragon of night. "They're not so different from us. They feel everything we feel, experience the same emotions. They can understand us if they're exposed to the same languages, just like humans—"

"Are you here to pitch us reasons to befriend dragons?" Snotlout spoke up. He received a sharp strike to his shoulder for speaking out of turn.

"Hold your tongue," Spitelout hissed. Snotlout scowled at his father, restraining an immediate backlash with a clenched jaw. Hiccup shook his head.

"No. Not yet, anyway. My point is—they're just as much a victim of this war as we are. This... mind control, it's very real. Believe me when I say that relying on humans for food is insulting to them. They're being manipulated and humiliated every time they're driven into these 'raids'. They don't want to do it."

Toothless snorted his agreement.

"Will you take us to the nest?" Stoick asked, still open with his intentions.

"No," Hiccup responded with equal frankness. The finality in his answer caused four, beard-shrouded mouths to fall open, each ready to release their own protest. Hiccup quickly continued, "You're humans, you'll die. This isn't something you can just sail into."

"You're human," Stoick stressed, and the barest hints of desperation read in the curve of his eye. Surely, surely, his son hadn't gone so far as to...?

"I am human," Hiccup assured the group, granting them more relief than they would ever know. "Only a dragon can locate it. That, and, the nest is encased in this... poisonous mist. I was flying through it so I was exposed for a much shorter time than someone who travels by boat. But I was sick for a while after. I think...I think if someone's exposed to it too long it could kill them. And that doesn't even get into the size of this demon," Hiccup added with a breathy, humorless laugh. "I only saw the head, and I can tell you even the combined efforts of your best warriors won't put a scratch on it."

"So you're saying you can only tell us that there's nothing we can do?" Spitelout appeared frustrated.
Despite suffering the same incredulity, Stoick put a calming hand on his shoulder.

"I'm *saying* that you can't beat this thing without me," Hiccup stressed. "Not with your current tactics. But I'll need help. The dragons need help. There's going to be a lot of involvement needed if we want any hope of surviving this."

"We have," Gobber informed him. "The alliances between villages have never been stronger."

"Which is good, but, like I said, humans alone can't beat this."

"So what, exactly, do you propose we do?" Stoick asked. He had a sneaking suspicious where Hiccup was going with this.

Hiccup took a breath, steeling himself for a solution no sane Viking that he knew of would go for.

"There's really...Gods, this is so complicated. I don't want to be making all the decisions. But I think...I think we're going to need volunteers...people who are willing to bond with dragons, like I have. To ride them and help put us on more even grounds with the demon..."

The men went back to staring at him, much like when he first arrived. But instead of staring for the purpose of sizing-up, they looked at him like he was mad. The sensation of such scrutiny felt so memorable to Hiccup that the beginnings of irritation set in.

"We're out of options," Stoick admitted, half speaking to his men. "We'll have to try something new. But this..."

"It's not for everyone, I know," Hiccup hastily spoke. "But if I could just get *some* people to help me free dragons...if we could whittle down the demon's army, we would have *such* a better chance at beating this."

"This is a strategy that should be discussed by more than just us," Spitelout murmured by Stoick's shoulder. His brother nodded.

"Aye, you're right," he agreed beneath his beard. "Not everyone will go for this. Very few, in fact. We can work this into our decision—"

"I can hear you," Hiccup cut in before his father could speak directly to him. "*I did* say that I didn't want to make all the decisions, didn't I?"

Stoick frowned long enough for Hiccup to feel rather sheepish about the slight attitude he just displayed.

"You'll have diplomatic immunity," Stoick informed him slowly. "You'll be allowed back in the village, protected, provided you help us win this war to the best of your ability. Is that acceptable? Shall we make this official?"

Hiccup released a heavy breath, realizing this was actually coming into fruition.

"Yeah. I'm coming down," he announced. "And Toothless will shoot you if you harm me in any way."

A soft roar rumbled from the dragon's breast and it sneered to reveal a mouthful of pointed teeth. The men kept their hands from their weapons and took a step back, giving the pair a wider berth.

Hiccup did as he said, jumping down and landing dangerously close to a hörgr. Now on level
ground, Stoick could see that Hiccup reached his shoulder, nearly equal to his brother's height. Already noticeably taller than Snotlout.

An inappropriate gratification swelled his torso, filling his lungs with enough breath to move his armor.

Stoick stiffly stuck out a hand, focusing on action to override the dangerous territory his emotions wanted to tread. He finished mourning the loss of his son long ago; he would not give himself false hope. He had no son.

_He had no son._

Hiccup approached the offered appendage, eyes darting between every man present, seeking for a _hint_ of hostile movement before daring to lift his own. He paused just a finger length away, holding out on sealing the deal for one more requirement.

"Swear on this altar. That no harm will come to me or Toothless...or any dragon I should vouch for."

Stoick wanted to keep Hiccup's gaze for the entire process of marking their agreement, but his eyes were forcibly drawn to the dragon. The beast returned his stare, reflecting back every ounce of contempt he held for it. Could he allow such a creature to walk the stones of his village? It was capable of great destruction, its history of devastation told for centuries. It also had remained docile and aloof at Hiccup's side. A loyalty they would have to exploit.

For the greater good, he staunchly reminded himself. For the greater good.

"I swear," Stoick gruffly agreed. "So long as no dragon you vouch for harms my people."

Hiccup gripped his father's hand, and he made sure to keep it strong so that the shaking of his limbs would go unperceived. So much nervous energy coiled in his gut that he felt like he could fire Framherja ten times in a row.

Stoick showed no surprise on his face, but Hiccup would forever swear that he saw pride in his father's gaze. A traitor, vagabond, and for the first time he could remember his father looked _proud_ of him.

"I swear," he stated, just loud enough for Stoick to hear.

"We'll call a meeting," Stoick announced to both Hiccup and his party. "Let the village know Hiccup isn't to be touched, that he's a temporary ally to Berk for the duration of this war."

Snotlout stared at the clasped, pumping hands with a leaden ball of dread rolling in his stomach.

Hiccup was smart—he'd heard it mentioned time and again by the chief, by Gobber, by his own father. Hiccup was showing promise. Hiccup would be allowed in the village again.

Snotlout wasn't smart—he knew this. He wasn't stupid, but he wasn't smart. Not like Hiccup. Snotlout couldn't run the village on his own; he already admitted to himself he would need Fishlegs' sheer intelligence and Astrid's temperance at his disposal to run a tight ship. It would be perfect—his perfect rule. He would be okay with relying on those two; for the longest time only he and Fishlegs knew the exact details of Berk's morbid situation. And he and Astrid fought back to back, bathed in blood, for much of the past year.

The twins had been his best friends since before he could communicate with more than his
childhood, wooden hammer. They knew him—knew his faults, knew how to calm him when he was being unreasonable. This was his group of trustees.

He worked too hard to lose it all now. He had a future set for himself, set for Berk, and Hiccup would not ruin it.

Stoick released the hand.

"I'll make the announcement tonight. We'll hold a meeting tomorrow in which you'll speak."

"Fantastic," Hiccup muttered under his breath. He began to pull back from the taller man. As if taking a silent cue, the dragon—who had been still as any of the surrounding rocks until then—dropped down to Hiccup's side. The men had their weapons up in an uncontrollable reflex, spurring Hiccup into stinging them with a reproachful glare.

"You will not hurt him," Hiccup ordered, and he didn't care if it added a sour taste to this otherwise neutral encounter. He cleared the distance between the ground and the saddle in one jump, landing seated. Gobber in particular noted how Hiccup's foot slipped into an odd pedal that hung from the saddle.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Stoick said. Why did he suddenly feel as awkward as he used to when faced with speaking to his son? Like he still had how idea how to communicate with him outside of diplomacy.

"Tomorrow," the boy repeated, this time not quite meeting Stoick's eyes. With nothing left to say, he and the dragon crouched as one unit before launching into the air. A ripple of airborne dust rushed over the ground, coating the shins of their spectators.

Hiccup couldn't bring himself to turn around as he and Toothless took off. He could feel the stares—some of awe, some of deep-seated fear—heavy against his back, like anchors trying to drag him back to the ground. His fingers twisted into the faded leather of the saddle.

::Are you okay?::

They rose higher and higher, towards the deepest length of blue capping the sky. Hiccup closed his eyes, focusing on the touch of the winds. They wrapped around him in welcome, comforting arms, assuring him that he was safe now, that he didn't have to be brave any more.

"Yeah," Hiccup croaked. The sky was still too bright for him to allow the tears to fall.

######

The forest floor was coated in death. Dead leaves, dead branches, dead bark.

Trees shed death; they shed anything that could not benefit them. It was how they stayed strong, how they lasted through generations and generations to witness the foolishness of humans.

Astrid took quiet satisfaction in stomping on these useless castings. Leaves crunched and branches snapped, crying out under her weight, perhaps lamenting their permanent position.

Trees didn't take this foot fodder back. That's why trees lived forever—they were made entirely of strength and life.
Astrid had been stomping through the woods for some time now, her arms swinging rather wildly to keep stride. She had a vague idea as to where her feet wanted to take her, but her mind was far too cluttered to care one way or another. She hadn't felt this riled up over something she had no control over since...since...

Since her mother died.

The village learned what she and her friends had learned—that the Chief would meet with Hiccup to negotiate his status. That Hiccup would return, would set foot in their village once again. Hiccup's outlawry would be suspended...

Hiccup. Hiccup. Hiccup. His name seemed to pop up in every corner of the village. She couldn't escape it. In light of everything, he was being treated as a neutral party. He slighted them, but he had information they needed and a willingness to help them. They were in a time of begging, and beggars couldn't be choosers.

She didn't understand it. Not what she felt; not her anger or reaction as a child, not this numbing agitation now.

Everything around Hiccup had been so...anticlimactic. His secret and his departure had been pretty epic—she could give him that—but then, like a finger's snap, it became old news.

When it first happened she couldn't get him out of her mind, and the only thing she wanted to do was to move on from him. She blamed it on the constant chatter; the greatest betrayal of their clan to date, by the chief's son no less, was no small matter. It was all anyone wanted to talk about and she couldn't wait until it would pass, until normalcy could commence, until she could move on from this absent rival...

As Astrid's mind stewed on those frustrating months, her hand ran along the granite texture of stone walls, bracing herself for the uneven footing leading into the very same alcove where she last saw him.

Astrid had, eventually, gotten her wish; months after Stoick of Berk lost his son, the talking stopped. But in her mind, he stayed—he stayed when everyone else had forgotten. When the raids became overbearing and their numbers started to drop and alliances started popping up left and right...he stayed. He stayed in her mind and memory, tormenting her. He wouldn't leave her alone.

For months and months, the question of 'why?' aggrieved her. Plagued her.

Astrid swallowed, the soft earth of the beautiful sanctuary yielded to the soles of her boots, her eyes drank the waving leaves of trees and the bouncing lights of the pond.

It wasn't until now, standing in the cove—in almost the exact same spot—that held her last memories of him, did the answer come to her.

She shuffled through the grass, getting a feel for that moment years ago. She toed the overgrown blades, picturing an imprint in its pattern. This was where she shoved him down—gods she was angry—and this was where he pushed her down.

Astrid closed her eyes, soaking up the scents and the last rays of sun, remembering...

It was his face. Her last vision of him as she shook her head, backing up, one step after another. To this day, she remembered every detail of Hiccup's face.

Just before she turned to run off with his most desperately protected secret.
Disappointment.

He—Hiccup—was disappointed in her.

She was perfection, and no one, not even her parents, had ever looked at her with disappointment. Until him. Until that moment. It was an expression that haunted her, even through her harshest sessions of training and self-discipline. That face, those eyes—like he expected more from her, like she let him down, like she didn't live up to his standards. And she hated it, she hated him, because he made her want to hate herself and she didn't know why.

She did what was right—everyone would agree. So how could he, with his weak body and timid habits, make her feel like she was the villain?

They had been fifteen. It was the year she was supposed to enjoy the most—her first dragon kill, her first hunt—and he ruined it, he ruined it beyond beating her in dragon training. He had her questioning her morals, her own competence, long after he left. She hated him then; she didn't know if that still held true, but Astrid knew, at one point, that she hated Hiccup Horrendous Haddock. She hated him for causing the villagers to doubt her just once—despite the fact that she restored their faith in her soon after. She hated him for leaving them just as their war fell out of control, for devastating their chief when they needed him most. She hated him for escaping while she still had to accept a husband. He got away. He got off this island. He didn't have to balance his desires with expectations because he just up and left like they meant nothing to him.

And most of all, she hated him for stealing her—

The familiar 'shwing' of metal sliced through air, startling Astrid from her thoughts. Something gleamed by her nearly as quickly as the sound registered; with a dull thud, a bladed weapon had lodged itself into the ground by her feet.

For a moment, she couldn't move. Not even the birds in that cove dared make a sound, like the world had graciously held, waiting for her to catch on.

Under any other circumstance, Astrid Hofferson would have been turned, poised, and ready to take down anyone who dared to sneak up on her. But the sight of this particular weapon had frozen her. Her eyes locked on the familiar, bolted, wooden handle and the double-edged blade, one end snug into the earth, the other upright and glimmered in the sunlight. Greeting her like a long-lost friend.

She'd know that axe anywhere. It was her axe.

Her hand moved forward, Astrid watched it move as though it weren't even apart of her. Her fingers touched it—the torn wraps of the handle, feeling as stiff as they looked—and a spell of nostalgia waved over, so powerful she could hardly breathe. Her palm slid down the wood, twisting a grip around the handle.

A shock of pain struck her heart when she realized it didn't quite fit right against the creases of her fingers. Not like she remembered it. Her hand was bigger now; they hadn't grown together like they were supposed to—she and her axe.

Her mother's axe.

With that pain came reality, and with reality came realization—realization that she couldn't have one without the other. Her chest felt oddly tight and her lungs empty of air.

Astrid turned.
Chapter End Notes

Well, you got one reunion :) I have butterflies in my stomach--still do, after all these years--because I think (know) people built up their expectations for this meeting too much.

So let me know what you think. There were a lot of character interactions, some more Astrid-introspection. Too emotional? Not emotional enough? Astrid make more sense? Astrid make LESS sense?
He was the same and different in so many ways. His features blurred in the gloaming—distorted by the sharp shadows of every crevice in his face, every wrinkle in his tunic. He looked like Hiccup. He looked like an adult Hiccup...just never the one she conjured within her mind.


Astrid forced herself into instant, objective thinking. Now was not the time to record the details of Hiccup's appearance—they weren't crucial to her in this moment. Now was not the time to make comparisons and appraisals. They had all grown up, all changed. She'd seen it first hand in Fishlegs, Tuffnut and Snotlout, so why should Hiccup be any different?

What mattered was his presence. That he was there, standing on that rock and looking down at her as she looked down on him two years ago...

The overlapping situations ended there. Where she had jumped down and confronted him, he remained atop the rock, careful and unreadable, crouched on his perch and looking ready to spring away should she choose to chuck an axe at him.

Admittedly, attacking him listed as the furthest thing on her mind. Even if assaulting him wasn't professed as temporarily forbidden, Astrid couldn't seem to work up the rage necessary to attack a human being. She couldn't work up much of anything. Thoughts would start and stop, incomplete, impossible to grasp or act on.

So she simply watched him, squinting at an image darkened by a late sun.

"Astrid," he greeted softly. A pale and perfectly cordial salutation given their last moments together.

Gods, was that his voice? She had forgotten what he sounded like—only his face and the emotions it conveyed spoke to her in her memories. He blathered and mumbled. That's what she remembered of it.

"Hiccup," she forced from her throat, a fair bit terser but no less calm. She never took her eyes off him as she wretched her axe from the ground.

Her body jerked with the action, both her fists clenched—one around the axe handle, one at her side—but he didn't blink, didn't react as though she just threatened him.

He had some blades on him—what looked to be a curved sword and a dagger—and she could just
make out the silhouette of a bow at his back—one that seemed to have an uncanny ability to catch
every golden beam of the sunset. Whether he knew how to use any of these weapons or not had yet
to be seen, but Astrid would take no chances.

They stared at each other a moment longer. Then Hiccup took a slow breath, as though bracing
himself for a difficult lecture, and the compulsion to speak struck Astrid.

"I—"

"You took my axe." The words flared from her lips with whip-like severity, and Astrid found great
satisfaction in the stunned silenced that followed.

Reality worked over her like the slow lather of a cloth. She faced the man whose actions and
behavior bedeviled her mind over the last two years, yet all her temper wanted to focus on was the
axe. The significance of her renewed possession over it hit her hard now that it was back in her hand
—stolen and returned, but tainted. He could never fully return what he took. It wasn't the same
anymore. A weapon was sacred to its wielder, lauded to lineage, and Hiccup went and ruined the
strongest bond she ever had with her mother—Glüm the Plucky.

Hiccup appeared shocked for all but a breath. Then coldness crept into his eyes, like they could no
longer reflect the burnt glow of the sun.

"You chased me from my home," he countered, and some of that neutrality he commanded so well
earlier fell to an edge.

Astrid welcomed the loss of composure. Speaking aloud one of the many things that bothered her
brought up some of that wrath and resentment she felt years ago. Standing in the same cove, in the
same spot, only amplified these feelings. A grave injustice happened upon this grass—to whom was
unclear in her mind, but the lingering, negative energy charged the very air they breathed. She
wanted to react to it, embrace it, and she wanted to see him do the same. She wanted to see him as
upset as she felt.

She took a step closer to the rock, intrepid of his ground leverage.

"You ran away!"

He ran away with a dragon after gaining the respect of their village. He slapped them all in the face
and she needed to find out why. How could he look at her like she wronged him after all he did—
after all he chose to do?

Hiccup leaned slightly back at her approach. She watched in shrewd awareness as he shook his head
and inhaled deeply through his nose. He didn't like this—Astrid could read it in his body language.
Good.

"It didn't have to be like this. I didn't have to be outlawed—" he began, but she had to cut him off
there.

"I believe you wrote "self exiled" on your note, didn't you?"

Hiccup's jaw clenched at the reminder of that note; she saw the shadow in the hollow of his cheek
jump. He stood, so abruptly that Astrid felt the grip on her axe tighten with no conscious cue.

"I needed time to figure things out," he told her. There was a sorrow, a strain, to his voice. Like he
honesty wanted her to understand. "There was so much...and it happened so fast. I still needed a
home!"
How could things have been different if he still had that connection to Berk? He wouldn't have gone so far. He could have monitored Berk, could have made changes earlier...ease this new vision of dragons more gently...

Hiccup bore a passion in his expression that Astrid was unprepared for, and the first wisps of guilt began to fester. She stamped them out, holding onto her arguments, refusing to play the bad guy to his choices. Her own righteous anger was no longer enough to fuel her belligerence, so Astrid thought of Stoick, of the defeat and grief that poisoned the rest of their village. She thought of the way Hiccup hurt the classmates that looked up to him—Fishlegs, especially.

She never saw it then, but thinking back on it Astrid realized the once excitable boy was heavily subdued in the weeks following Hiccup’s departure. And the way he pushed himself now...like he felt he owed Hiccup something...

The guilt petered out.

"Home?" The word tasted sour on her tongue, having heard it first from his lips. "Is that the way you treat your home? You lied to us! You were a cheat! You didn't care about our village or supporting it or—or protecting it! You chose a dragon over your family!"

"That dragon is my family!" Hiccup snarled. Not a flicker of shame graced his features at his declaration.

Astrid took another step forward.

"You left! You left us!"

"I came back!" Hiccup snapped back, and while his decision to do so might have made all the difference to their village—to their future—Astrid couldn't quite let go of the past yet.

"Do you have any idea what you did to our village? To your father? You took away the faith other villages had in us. Our reputation—"

"Oh please." The sneer on Hiccup's face looked so out of place to her, but his tone of disdain sounded oddly fitting—like he'd used it before. "Don't even pretend I mattered that much to the village. If you hadn't run off to tell on me, how long do you think it would have taken anyone to realize I was missing? Hmm? A week? After a raid that didn't end with the destruction of something completely unrelated?"

He appeared stronger, confident in his anger. Astrid couldn't let him use a past reputation as an excuse.

"Not then! Not when everyone was looking at you." She internally winced at the accusing tone, an indication that some bitterness regarding Hiccup's breeze through dragon training lingered. "The way you did it was wrong."

His lip curled, evidently sharing in her frustration.

"Wrong for who? For what? Pride? Reputation? Do you have any idea what's going on behind this war?"

This rankled Astrid to an entirely different level. He would not—not—speak about the war as though he were more involved than they.

"I know I was here to fight it! I was here—you weren't—!"
"I'm here now! I'm going to finish it! Why do you think I risked—"

"That's what we've been trying to do with the nest hunts! Not once did we stop fighting—stop looking—until you—"

"Look where it got you!" Hiccup retorted. "You'd think after centuries of failing with such a tactic you'd try something else."

She ignored his derision.

"We were honorable in our opposition and open with our intentions—we were surviving the only way we knew how—"

"It wasn't working!" Hiccup loudly proclaimed over her. "Will you listen to me? It wasn't working. Why does it matter how something is done? It should just get done! People were dying for no reason. Someone had to try something new. All we needed was to try and communicate with them instead of—"

"That's my point!" Astrid retaliated. "There has to be something very wrong with you to try and befriend a dragon in the first place! It should have never happened! I don't care if it turned out for the best or if you are welcomed back into the village when this is all over—you committed an act of treason somewhere along the line and someone has to acknowledge that!"

Her throat hurt by the time she finished and it suddenly occurred to Astrid that they had been shouting for quite some time.

Hiccup threw up a hand, mockingly.

"Fine! You've acknowledged it. Well done. Yes, I committed treason to the Viking way and I'll freely admit it. But at least now we're seeing progress! We will see progress. So while you're at it, why don't you acknowledge that something new had to happen to see any in the first place?"

She snorted, refusing to do any such thing. "We saw progress on the other side, that's what we saw."

"That I had nothing to do with!" he snapped, eyes suddenly ablaze. "That was a coincidence! I've been nothing but truthful about the mechanics of this war."

"Then answer this!" Astrid barked, and she could feel the back of her neck heat with all the energy within her. "Did you really leave our village with the intent of finding out more about our war? Or is that just going to be your excuse to get back in our good graces?"

Hiccup's mouth opened, but nothing came out. Astrid could see the excitement and liveliness drain from his body as he struggled with an answer. The question caught him off guard, which meant she was finally asking the right ones. Her breath caught in her throat without her even realizing as she waited for his response.

"I left," Hiccup started, and the drop in his voice, the fall of his shoulders, told Astrid he would answer honestly. "I left because I didn't know what else to do...and I thought it would be better for everyone if I did. I was tired of the double life, and if it continued someone would get hurt—physically hurt. Killed even."

He licked his lips, possibly contemplating stopping there. But then, after an audible, shallow inhalation, he continued.

"I started to learn the truth about the war...the control, a long time ago. I chose to take my time
coming back, because I didn't know...Astrid, I swear I had no idea that things would get worse. I thought Berk would continue as always, just without me to screw it up. I thought I had time—"

Maybe it was his candor, finally the first of the two to step back and admit some wrong, but something punctuated that ballooning friction between them.

"You didn't." Astrid sighed under her breath.

"No, I didn't." He looked troubled. He did feel guilt, she could see that, but it wasn't enough. Astrid mulishly wouldn't let this be enough. She wanted a punishment of some sort for him—for him not to be allowed in the village. Not after abandoning them.

"You left to protect yourself," she said sharply.

"I did."

"And to protect your dragon."

"Yes."

"You didn't do it to save us."

He looked her in the eye and agreed. "No. I didn't."

Astrid huffed. So much defiance showered down on her from that rock; so much pride that she thought to be tremendously undeserved. He freely admitted all this wrong, but he refused to appear regretful.

That's what she wanted. She wanted him to feel regret, not guilt.

Even under her dark stare, Hiccup would not grant her this. His hands went to his hips. He kept his chin up as he looked down on her.

"Judge me all you want, Astrid. Your approval no longer matters to me. Just know that the reasons I left and the reasons I came back are completely different."

Her lips pursed. Some of his words stung her, but Astrid felt more annoyed at how hollow he managed to make her anger feel. Like she was trying to hold onto an animosity he refused to take part in.

"Where's your dragon?" she asked in a churlish grunt.

Hiccup snapped his mouth shut, and for a moment Astrid thought he would refuse to answer her. Then he jerked his chin upward and, in a flat tone, delivered what may have been the most ominous words she'd ever heard:

"Right behind you."

She whirled; her weight converged on the ball of her foot. Instincts that kept her alive up until now kicked in, and Astrid had her axe up before she registered the size or proximity of the dark mass at her back. She saw the scales, the slit pupil constrict in those toxic eyes, and her muscles reacted. Her stomach had clenched, her shoulders taught as they swung the axe up in preparation of charging at the fabled Night Fury—

Something, power—pure, raw, ineffable power—struck the head of her suspended axe in the peak of its arc. Astrid could feel heat flare at the side of her face, feel it lick her arms and knuckles. She
heard the scream of her old axe under crackling energy; the harsh pierce in her ear momentarily
deafened her. Light exploded from the corner of her vision in a violent blast that shook metal, wood
and bone.

The weapon dislodged from her hand with a ruthless jerk. Her shoulder wrenched back, her heart
jumped, her knees buckled...it happened so quickly and so brutally that the shock of it all stunned
Astrid's entire body. She stumbled backwards with the pull, gaining a broader vision in the process to
help her dazed mind figure out what happened.

Hiccup was off the rock. He had a bow gripped by its riser and brandished it at her like one would a
sword. She would have laughed at a sight if she could shake the feeling that she had just brushed
with death.

Astrid could see it wasn't some trick of the light that made this bow glow amber. This bow emitted
the very same energy she still felt burdening her right arm. She held the throbbing limb to her chest,
trying to settle the tremors zapping every joint from the tips of her fingers to the nub of her elbow.

Hiccup jabbed the bow at her again, inexplicably confirming Astrid's suspicions that it caused this
something. His brow hung low over his eyes, shadowing his face so much his features appeared
indiscernible.

"If you touch him, I will kill you."

Astrid backpedalled several more steps, needing to get away from him—the bow—the dragon. She
faltered over a hard, rocky patch of land and it snapped her out of her stupor.

"What...what is that—?"

*There was a Night Fury!* One part of her mind screamed. *Look at the Night Fury! Pick up your axe!*
But the rest of her attention would not leave that glowing weapon. She thought it was the sun, at
first...a weird metal, a weird time of day...that golden aura...but this thing was...this was...

"You are not to attack him," Hiccup continued in that low, careful voice. Not careful like he used to
be as he sized her up. He spoke carefully in a menacing, promising way. He wanted her to
understand how very bad it would be should she ever do so again.

She didn't like him speaking to her like that. She was terrified of that weapon and her arm hurt and
she felt naked and in danger unarmed before a dragon, but Astrid would not abandon her dignity.

She was a Viking.

She took a deep breath—shaky, but steadying to her heart. Her posture straightened and her
shoulders squared.

"What is that?" she repeated. If he wanted her word that she would not raise a weapon to a dragon,
he would be sorely disappointed.

Astrid's eyes continually darted between the weapon and the dragon. The black beast had sat back
on its haunches, towering at Hiccup's side but displaying no aggression.

Hiccup set his weight on one hip. "This is a bow."

Gods, he was being difficult now, and possibly all because she raised an axe to his pet.

"Why...how did it do that?" She tried again. "Where did you get that?"
The dragon moved and Astrid felt her heart stop. It only crooned, releasing a sad sound she'd never heard a dragon make, and nudge Hiccup in the shoulder with its head. Hiccup took his eyes off her to give the beast a soft smile. He lifted his free hand and rested it on the dragon's temple.

"Miklagard," he answered, shortly. He continued to make eye contact with the dragon, and Astrid felt strangely ignored. Then the single word registered.

"Miklagard?" She mumbled. That was so far. To sail there would take months, years... A distance of safety, years away from their war. That bastard. "So I guess you've had some grand adventures, while we're all stuck here, fighting—"

Hiccup scoffed like she just uttered an excuse for a poorly aimed throw. "You're not stuck. It's your decision to stay."

Astrid's rancor returned full force.

"Yeah, you're right. I decide to stay because this is my home and I don't find it quite as easy to just up and leave it while it's dying—"

She let out a short—though still embarrassing—squeak when he swung the end of the bow at her neck like a sword.

"Don't you dare," Hiccup hissed, taking a step closer to her—away from the dragon—and giving her no choice but to step back with it, "think there was anything easy about leaving my home."

They returned to the staring—this time on even footing, but with Hiccup having the advantage in arms.

"You still chose to run," Astrid breathed.

"So did you."

What?

She narrowed her eyes. "I stayed."

She stayed and fought and bled for her village. Hadn't they just covered that?

Hiccup lowered the bow and backed off slightly. One shoulder bobbed in a shrug.

"You ran from me."

And, apparently, this action made all the difference to him. Had she stayed, things would have been different—not necessarily better, but different. Astrid hated how she recognized this point almost as soon as he spoke it, because identifying with him was the first step to a reconciliation she wasn't ready for.

"You let me," she returned in a rushed breath. He had a Night Fury, he command over the beast. "Why did you let me go?"

Hiccup stared at her for a moment, and she knew the question caught him as off guard as it did herself.

"I thought about it," he said with his second bout of surprising honesty.

"Yeah?"
Hiccup shrugged again. "It wasn't worth trying to change a mind that couldn't be changed."

Astrid's eyes narrowed, her shoulders tightened. There was that word again: Change. Why couldn't she change? Who was he to decide this?

She raised her chin, tired of feeling attacked by him.

"Well, I guess that's what you get for over-thinking things." A lesson, she believed, that proved why Vikings always won confrontation. They knew how to press their advantage—something Hiccup never learned.

His frown deepened.

"Maybe I already considered you a lost cause. Maybe the reason this war has lasted as long as it has was because no one wanted to find a solution to it."

"No one—," The collar of her tunic felt hot against her neck and chest from the anger that simmered beneath her breast. "How dare you...after everything our parents, our ancestors, have done to keep us safe, you have the nerve...

"It shouldn't have taken three hundred years for someone to try and get to know them." The calm manner in which Hiccup delivered his argument sounded jarring to her ears after all the yelling. The dragon had nudged its great head up under Hiccup's arm as he spoke, presenting such an open companionship between natural enemies that she felt sick.

Astrid shook her head and began taking backwards steps destined for the rock-stacked entrance.

"You should have never tried in the first place! What could possibly justify anyone ever trying to befriend a dragon?"

Hiccup pulled the loose hair back from his face, a derisive smile on his face.

"This is why I didn't even try to follow you—this was your problem. It always has been—"

Astrid reeled back, nearly struck speechless at his audacity. "My problem?"

"You don't think for yourself, Astrid!"

"Oh I think! I think you're a self-centered—"

"You don't question anything!"

"—traitorous jackass who—"

"You—you're mindless!"

"Mindless!" She screeched. "How—why—!"

The dragon had done nothing but silently regard them, it's head cocked as though it were listening to polite conversation. Astrid was willing to take that as good omen for attacking Hiccup and getting away with it.

"You have no respect!" she howled. "No loyalty! Not even to your own species!"

"This isn't a matter of loyalty. This is a matter of necessity."
"Necessity! Necessity justifies you tricking our village, breaking your dad's heart, allowing this war to—"

"I didn't allow for anything to happen!"

"You said you knew what the problem was but stayed away anyway! You allowed for every unnecessary death in our village!"

Hiccup took an aggressive step forward—and because he had been yelling, and scowling, and generally unpleasant, Astrid didn't find his aggression out-of-place anymore. She would have welcomed any physical attack from him, because words weren't getting them anywhere.

It was the dragon's tail positioned over his stomach that kept a physical confrontation from happening. Hiccup looked down at the thick, black end in bemusement. He followed the appendage to the eyes of its owner, and then blinked as though coming back into himself.

Astrid could almost see the wave of calm sweep over the man and she swiftly realized they would never see eye-to-eye. They wouldn't fight, and that's how she settled things. They wouldn't reason this out, and that's how he settled things. He thought she couldn't change; she would not twist to follow any justification for his actions. They would argue until the sun fell to darkness and that dragon would melt into the shadows, leaving her at an even greater disadvantage. She had to get out of there.

"Whatever," she threw out scathingly, returning Hiccup's attention to her once more. "Do what you have to and save the village—if you even can. I'm out of here."

This time, Astrid didn't run out of the cove. She strode purposefully; her only hurry was to escape their presence for her own mental well-being.

She made sure not to look back because, this time, she didn't want to see what expression he wore for her.

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Cracks and crunches filled the darkening forest as booted feet beat down the brittle castoffs once more. Astrid stomped back to her village much in the same manner she left it—agitated, disjointed...

Her arm still stung. Not like a bee-sting would, but like something had shaken the very bone of it hard enough to leave lingering tremors in its wake. She gripped her forearm in irritation as she tromped over the very same path she used to get to the cove.

She—he—it was all so infuriating! She still felt stuck. They would go around in that circle until the Ragnarök; they would never figure out that day in the cove—who was right, who was wrong. He refused see her point, he wouldn't fully commit to his mistakes. He had a plethora of excuses at his disposal, each more twisted than the next.

And she sure as Hel would not stoop to conceding his side—it made no sense! Not for a Viking. Not even for a human.

Her arm throbbed along with her ire, and her clutch around it tightened.

He was unbelievable. His gall. His rationale. This was the second time he had attacked her to protect
that devil...

And what was that thing he hit her with? She hadn't seen its power directly, but she sure as Hel felt it. She knew that bow caused the explosion, but she didn't know how he got his hands on it. Where would someone have to go to get something like that? Something that powerful? No blacksmith of Miklagard—Midgard even—could have forged it.

No blacksmith of Midgard would have given it to him. Surely someone a bit more competent, a bit more sane, such as a chief or a guard—even herself—would be more suited for—

"Oh—damn it!" Astrid screamed to the heavens.

She left her axe. Again.

Her feet slowed to a stop as she contemplated a return. The blow her pride would take concerned her more than any threat the dragon posed, and that sort of irrationality vexed her the most.

A line of stark shadow wiped across the land and tree trunks as something passed overhead. Disturbed from her indecision, Astrid snapped her head up in time to see a sable mass glide to the ground in front of her—sideways, so that she got a good measure of the Night Fury's length as it blocked her path home.

The young shieldmaiden had to take a moment and absorb the sight of Hiccup on a dragon because, for the first time, Astrid felt like she viewed the complete picture. His clothing, his hair, the arm braces to match the scales, the belt equipped with weapons and hooks for securing him in flight...it all fit now that he was outfitted into the saddle, feet in the stirrups. Suddenly, she couldn't recognize him as Berk's outlaw. Not when he looked like he came from another culture all together, a man never meant to be a Viking.

She stepped back, her hand falling to the sword at her side. It was a short sword, carried out of habit rather than necessity, but it was better than nothing.

"What are you doing?" she asked with a low and cautious threat to her voice. She had the impression that he couldn't kill her just as she couldn't kill him, that some sort of truce had been implemented at this time.

But did it apply to the Night Fury?

The dragon's eyes lured her in, and Astrid had no choice but to meet it. They trapped her into a staring match so concentrated it blotted out her surroundings. With the environment quickly dimming, its hide became more and more indiscernible. The eyes popped out at her—not with threat or anger, but with pure, comprehensible irritation. She imagined her own face held a similar expression for much of the evening.

"As soon as I heard, I came straight up," Hiccup informed her. He stared at her with a sort of intensity that willed her to acknowledge the sincerity and desperation in his voice. An intensity equal to the one his dragon forced on her. She felt overwhelmed. Overwhelmed and confused as to why he was here.

Astrid could only stare right back, nonplussed.

"What?"

"As soon as I heard about the increase in attacks, I came back up. Even though I didn't feel prepared, I came." He bit his lip, and for someone who arrived rather imposing, he appeared unnerved. "I'm
When Astrid continued to regard him appraisingly, he went on. "I never wanted anything to happen to the village. I just hated my life here. I was so happy with Toothless—honestly happy—that I thought it was ultimately better for everyone. You guys liked fighting dragons...I didn't want anything to change by leaving. I just thought I'd disappear, and everything would go on as it was..."

"Everything changed anyway," Astrid uttered. Her voice sounded so quiet to her own ears that she wondered if the words ever reached him.

Hiccup was not a malicious person; she remembered this now. It seemed the longer she spent in his presence, the more she remembered of him. He never intended to hurt anyone when he unthinkingly ran off to do Loki's work. Often it was just the opposite, but he always seemed to manage it anyhow. He was a disaster. He was an incompetent, bumbling fool who usually got in way over his head. He was unable to display any Viking prowess no matter how hard he tried. He was an assuming idiot.

All far more forgivable failings than a betrayer determined to destroy a village from the inside out, but still highly irksome considering all he put her through.

"Yeah," Hiccup agreed, rubbing his arm. "That's why I'm here. I originally planned to come back and save the dragons from the demon. Now I know I have to save both."

The dragon made an unmistakable throat clearing, a noise so human that Astrid found herself staring at the beast long after Hiccup corrected his statement to "we have to save both".

In fact, it wasn't until Hiccup reached his hand out to her, palm up in an open gesture of welcome, did she return her attention to him.

She stared at it. "What?"

"Come on." Even his tone sounded inviting. Soft and humble—more like the Hiccup of her childhood. The dragon pawed the ground, snorting with impatience.

Astrid took a step back—toward the cove and toward the axe.

"Oh no."

Unlike the beast, Hiccup was patient. His hand never lowered.

"I need to show you what I should have showed you years ago. You need to understand." The dim lighting added something soft to his features, but she would not budge. His demeanor turned to insistence. "This opportunity will only come once in your life. He doesn't usually let anyone else ride him."

"I am not getting on that dragon," Astrid said with finality. She took another step backwards. Perhaps she could make a run for the cove, grab her axe and...steer clear of that bow.

"Running away again?"

The curl of his lips held the barest hints of complacency. She couldn't believe his nerve. It stung her considering who, exactly, accused her of "running away". Her shoulders squared at his words and her mouth opened with the intent of really laying into him.

"You're the one who—"
"I came after you this time," he cut her off, stalwart. "What are you going to do different?"

Astrid couldn't respond at first. She simply didn't know what to say to that. It sort of held true—he did come after her...she had called him out on it just moments ago. She didn't know if her dignity would suffer under accepting or rejecting the offer. Moral issues wrestled with the sheer concept of riding a dragon.

She didn't want to prove him right—not about her and Change, because she could change.

But should she?

"I'm giving you a choice," Hiccup went on. "I'm not going to force you to fly or anything...but I could really use your help in winning this war."

He sounded like he was backing off; he let up on the aggression first, he admitted his mistakes to a degree. Both were clear signs of submission. So why did she still feel provoked? Maybe it was the way he spoke, like he couldn't quite lose that patronization from the holds of his throat.

Hiccup made eye contact with every encounter between them, including this one. He challenged her. He never did that before. Snotlout never took anything seriously before. Fishlegs never took charge. Ruffnut never felt flattered by attention.

She was tired of this. She didn't want to stay in the same place anymore, take the same actions.

Her knees buckled forward in two steps, but something stopped her from advancing farther. Maybe her pride—change could mean admitting she was wrong in some sense—but more likely the dragon. It hadn't moved, hadn't acted like any dragon she'd ever encountered before, but that didn't mean it was any different. Could she really sit on its back? Behind an outlaw?

"Please Astrid," Hiccup implored in a quiet voice. He stared straight at her, and not with mistrust or anger, but with an appeal of sorts. "I need your help—yours—to win this war."

She regarded him a moment longer. He had not lied to her yet—not today. She was needed in this war; she wanted to make a difference, even if it was he who needed her.

She knew he was right about some things, though she'd die before she'd say it out loud. They needed to change tactics; they needed to take action within a desperate situation. She knew the game had changed, and Berk would have to as well if they wanted to survive.

Maybe it was time to step out of her comfort zone.

Astrid took the last steps to the dragon—a dragon much larger than she thought it'd be now that she stood next to it. The saddle harnessed to the thick neck and shoulders hovered over the level of her head.

She bypassed Hiccup's offered hand—it was really the only action that would help soothe her conscience for hopping on a saddled dragon—and hoisted herself onto the beast with a soft grunt. Hiccup allowed it, the dragon allowed it. Neither moved as she settled herself on the very end of the leather seating, perhaps hoping not to scare her off. This felt sacrilegious and she could only be thankful for the sinking sun and densely wooded area to cloak this grave slight.

Hiccup turned his face so she could discern his profile amidst the heavy shadows cast by the trees. It occurred to Astrid how very close they were. The saddle wasn't made for two, so her hips were forced to hug his backside lest she end up sitting directly on the dragon.
His eye sought hers—the color completely indistinguishable at this point in the evening.

"Thank you," he said with a quiet honesty that made it hard to meet his sideways gaze.

She pretended to adjust her tunic over her legs.

"Whatever," she mumbled. "Just show me what you need to show me so I can get home."

She couldn't—wouldn't—let on how absolutely terrified she felt in that moment. This was bad—wrong. Wrong like it was wrong to sneak out with her grandfather's battle shield after it was declared off limits.

Except, this was far worse. She didn't know what she was doing. Had she just done something completely stupid in the face of a challenge? A light panic settled in her stomach when she realized she had no control—the width of a dragon's back felt strange to her legs, relying on someone else's power, positioned at a man's back...it all felt unnatural. Unnatural was unfamiliar. Unfamiliar was dangerous.

Before she could think about hopping off and returning to the safety of natural ground, her ride shifted lower. A sense of tension filled both the bodies that she touched.

"You should hang on," Hiccup warned. His voice dipped along with his torso.

"Hold on to whaaaaAAAHHH!" Her question ended in a scream that the Isle of the Skullions would hear as the dragon took off in a diagonal launch. Astrid's hands immediately shot forward to latch onto the body before her as the trio twisted and weaved between trees. Her rigid posture contrasted with the synced sways of the boy and dragon moving with the flight pattern.

"W-where are we going?" she hissed. She wanted off.

She could feel Hiccup's ribs jiggle in silent laughter, the bastard.

"Up!"

They broke free from the shadows of the forest and suddenly the world had lightened a little.

Astrid didn't want cling so tightly to him, but the trees continued to fall farther and farther away until not even the highest branch of the tallest pine would catch a desperate jump.

Odin's lost eye—she was flying. Astrid could hardly hear anything but the roar of wind, could hardly feel anything but the stinging cold and the body she hugged and the absolute, terrifying dependence on the beast she road on. This was her only anchor she had; a dragon and its boy were the only thing standing between her and certain death.

Gods... A dragon...and this man...were the only things keeping her alive now. She was entirely dependent on them.

Astrid couldn't breathe. Not enough air could fill her lungs and yet too much crushed her.

Oh gods, oh gods, why did she get on that dragon? Why? What was she thinking? This wasn't worth proving anything. She was going to die. She had no control. She was at their mercy, out of her element. This wouldn't, couldn't, end well.

"You're fine."

With her cheek pressed against a blade of his shoulder, Astrid felt the strong vibrations of Hiccup's
chest cavity resonate with his reassurance. She didn't want his reassurance; she didn't want to heed
the warmth of his back, the rumble of his voice. She wanted to block all of this out until she returned
to land. She hated, hated, feeling this sort of terror. Warriors shouldn't feel like this. Warriors could
control their destiny and, to a certain extent, their death.

She couldn't control anything right now.

"Can we go down now?" Her voice wavered slightly with the request and she prayed to Thor that
Hiccup couldn't detect it.

"No."

Astrid bit her lip.

"Hiccup this isn't funny. I don't—wait...why are we going higher? Stop! Hiccup—Hiccup, stop!"

He ignored her.

"Close your eyes, and hold onto me."

Her eyes were riveted on the colors of Midgard; greens and browns blended together as more and
more details escaped her capture.

"I will not close my eyes and I am holding onto you." Astrid didn't think she could close her eyes if
she tried. The horror of her situation riveted her gaze downward; she stared into Hel's cold, hollow
eyes.

"Hold onto me like a normal person and not like you're trying to stab me with your fingers."

She squeezed him rather hard if the stiff pain in her rigid digits was anything to go by. Slightly
embarrassed, Astrid forcibly tried to relax her grip.

"Why are you doing this?" she moaned.

"You're focusing on the wrong thing," Hiccup coaxed. "Stop looking down. Stop looking for the
danger—"

Had she a little more peace of mind, Astrid may have sensed the sympathy he offered her.

"I don't have to look," she hissed to the back of his ear. "It's everywhere—we're hundreds of rôst in
the air—"

"Hardly," Hiccup intoned.

"If we fall—"

"I've fallen before." His voice was flat, and he showed no inclination to elaborate. "It couldn't stop
me from getting back up here...because the danger will never measure up to—to this. I mean...just
look at this...Gods, Astrid, we're humans who are flying! Why can't you see this? Why can't you see
the amazing—"

"You'll be an amazing, dead human if you ignore the dangers! I like being alive, thank you!"

Hiccup bowed his head for a moment. His lapse of silence only brought to attention the sheer,
deafening howls of a gale icy with the promise of death. She gripped him tighter.
Then he spoke in a soft voice still strong enough to reach her.

"You're alive Astrid. I'm not so sure you're living."

Something stopped her from responding to that. She wasn't sure if she had a response to begin with.

"Close your eyes," Hiccup commanded again.

There was something unearthly calming about his voice, about the entire energy around him. She could feel it spread from him into the dragon, into her.

Off guard, Astrid allowed her eyes to close.

The ground below disappeared, the black hide of the dragon disappeared. She continued to feel the sting of the wind, the cold and moist air, hear the wails of the heavens...

She felt Hiccup against her stomach, within her arms, and her sense of height and danger did diminish. He smelt like the air, but the warmth of his body balanced out the cold at her back. He was an anchor in rocky waters, a security that she unconsciously held tighter as she lost her sense of surroundings.

Astrid's stomach rolled amidst all these sensations, but try as she might she couldn't pin it down on nausea or disgust. She hardly registered the dragon beneath her anymore. She floated, weightless, and the pounding of her heart, the daring in her blood, enlivened her in a way she hadn't felt since her first kill.

For the first time since she could remember, Astrid allowed herself to just feel. She felt the war slip away, her mother's death, the expectations, the responsibilities, the guilt, the loss, the aggravation...all of it threaded from her body, thinning like her braid as strand after strand of hair escaped to brush her cheeks and tickle her lips.

Gods, she was tired of control. There was nothing she could do; Hiccup controlled one fin, the dragon controlled the other.

"Okay," she felt Hiccup say. "Open your eyes."

Her eyes opened.

Orange. Pink. White. Astrid had never seen color like this, warmth so bright she wondered if she'd ever known what color was to begin with. Swaddled in soft hues, isolated by the clouds. No ground or trees or mountains tantalized her with the safety of land. No endless fall through space threatened her.

She hadn't realized she gasped until a prickling frost invaded her throat. It didn't bother her anymore—the cold. The horror had receded, and in its place wonder she didn't want to feel thawed her reserve.

The reality of this moment had to be called into question, because Astrid couldn't imagine ever feeling so young again, so free. She was in the clouds—clouds so thick she couldn't find the world. She couldn't stay grounded.

She left Midgard. She left it when she never thought she'd leave the Barbaric Archipelagos.

One hand lifted from Hiccup's side and reached towards the uncatchable mist. She expected softness, some substance, but her hand went right through it, with only the gentle touch of ice to grasp back at
her fingers. She could have been holding Skadi's hand for all she knew.

The clouds broke and Astrid saw ocean. More ocean than she ever thought catchable in one eyeful, and sparkling as brightly as the sky under the final crest of the ripe sun.

The unexpected change of scenery shocked her into deeper respiration. She began to blink around, trying to readjust to so much exposure. How much time had passed? She felt like she'd been on that dragon for a lifetime when all she felt was fear, but in those few fleeting moments of breathlessness and beauty she noticed nothing.

They banked to the right. Astrid tore her eyes from the closing sunset as they circled the Isle of Berk.

She must have gasped again when they passed over her village, because Hiccup glanced over his shoulder. She missed the smile he sent her way in her fascination.

"That's—"

"Her home. Her house! That was her house! It was amazing considering the poor lighting and the sheer, diminutive size of their village, but Astrid could pick it out among the other droplet-like structures. The boats of the harbor looked more like toys than travel vessels. Bridges measured no longer than her pinky finger. Little lights bobbed around the branching paths—people with torches. Everything seemed so...small, so beneath her. There was a feeling of superiority that resonated within the awe of where she was. And she was flying over her village. By Freyja, she was doing the impossible, things she didn't dare dream about as a child.

Who else could do this? Had been here? How many others had seen a sun set from the sky itself, or inhaled a storm cloud, or saw war vessels as little more than floating piles of wood...because that's what they looked like to her, right now.

Astrid was no stranger to confidence or strength. Never before had she felt invincible.

Warm fingers slid over one of her hands resting on Hiccup's stomach. Her first instinct was to jerk it away, but something about that energy he exuded—so calm and assuring—had her accepting the heat of his palm to her skin.

"We are capable of so much." He spoke faintly, but his voice carried with the wind, reaching her ears like a whisper meant only for her. "Humans and dragons, together."

Do you understand now?

She didn't feel cold any longer, and it made no sense because they flew into a cold night. That stubborn anger fled her body with her woes, left to the clouds' mercy. She felt neutral. Open.

"This what you discovered," she murmured.

"This is why I left," he said. "This is what I needed to protect."

The fingers she felt ghosting over her skin gathered her hand up and gently relocated it to the side of the dragon's neck. Astrid allowed it, leaning forward to caress the scales of a Night Fury using her own power.

They were warm, alive. Astrid could feel the expansion of its cage as it breathed; she felt every few heartbeats align with the pulses of its wings.
His wings.

Exhausted and enlivened, Astrid rested her cheek back on Hiccup's shoulder, finding it easier to keep stroking the dragon, and sighed into the cloth of his vest.

"So it's true...the mind control thing? They're not really...?"

Hiccup stared resolutely at the village they circled. The sun had left the sky, but there was still a lightness to the world to present his hard face.

"They hate it. Imagine losing your free will."

Astrid tried to. She tried because, for the first time in her life, she felt inclined to try new things. She imagined it felt like she did when Hiccup first took off—confused, helpless, and regretful. Watching from the inside, trapped, and having no control over her fate.

"They need to be saved as much as we do," Hiccup explained. The dragon rumbled; she felt the noise bubble within its armor, beneath her hand. It felt sad.

"We all need to be saved," she whispered. Something broke inside her with those words—something of before that kept her on her strict regimen, on her religious following of the Viking code. This was bigger than Vikings, that's what Hiccup had been trying to tell her. This required flexibility, a redirection of her passion to protect. She was still needed, and she needed to be needed—that was the only thing she felt sure of herself.

"You think you're going to do this by yourself?" He couldn't possibly expect to accomplish such a thing.

Toothless barked.

"I meant the both of you," Astrid automatically corrected, and then a moment thereafter wondered why she did so.

Hiccup twisted a little more in his seat, the hand resting on hers slid further down her fingers. The smile he gave her wasn't condescending or mean like every other she had seen upon his lips that day. He looked coy. Hopeful.

"I want to show you something," he said.

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Hiccup barely had two feet on the ground when the schwung of sharp wings assaulted his ears. His face brightened at sight of his welcome party—two gargantuan dragons, sharp-toothed and doe-eyed.

He managed to get out a quick "Hey guys!" before the intrusive noses huffed along his chest and cheeks. The Nightmare pressed its snout to Hiccup's stomach, its nostrils flaring, scenting the unfamiliar hands that rested there moments ago. Hiccup smiled and patted the side of its face, allowing for it to satisfy its curiosity.

"Okay, okay," he laughed. The Timberjack knocked the small of Hiccup's back with a rough shove. He could hear it inhale what would be the strongest of Astrid's lingering fragrance. "Whoa, whoa, easy guys! Hey," he said again softly. He twisted and wiggled until his fingers could scratch a chin
each, trying to distract them enough to keep them from Astrid. "Take it easy."

::Calm down!:: Toothless snapped behind him. ::This female is nervous enough as is:::

"Toothless," Hiccup automatically warned at his usual testy behavior towards the rescues. The rest of the Night Fury's warning registered, and he recalled why he wanted to intercept the two dragons in the first place.

He whipped his head around to where Astrid stuck close to Toothless. Her skin stood out as pale, and she stared, tightlipped, at the horrifying dimensions of the dragons draped all over Hiccup.

Astrid was not ready for such a bold approach. Her face had set like she was prepared to attack at the slightest provocation. Hiccup had made too much progress with her to set her back now.

::Their enthusiasm is unnecessary:: Toothless sniffed.

Hiccup gave his friend a cheeky grin, even as he shoved the Nightmare's head and fetid breath from his face.

"Your jealousy is cute."

"What?" Astrid risked a quick glance at Hiccup for her question before she went back to sizing up the dragons.

"Eh, not you." Hiccup quickly retracted. It just occurred to him that he might have to monitor himself when speaking to Toothless in front of humans. Usually he would not bother, but he didn't want to push his luck with the Vikings considering how lucky he had been so far.

Now both his hands shoved away the insistent heads as Hiccup tried to fashion his body as a weak barrier between Astrid and the dragons.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"Ah, yeah," she said slowly. Her gaze remained steadfast on the Nightmare especially. He could only imagine her past experience with them. He took it as a good sign that she hadn't made any aggressive moves when taking into account the fact that he put her back on ground in the presence of more dragons.

"You sure?"

This time she looked at him and repeated with more confidence, "Yeah."

She managed to sound rather convincing, but she had yet to step away from Toothless. Paradoxical, considering she refused to approach him not so long ago.

"Where are we?"

Hiccup narrowed his eyes in thought. "The mazy Multitudes, I think."

With a start, Hiccup realized that he had to squint to read Astrid's expression. The night had crept up on them faster than he thought possible. Twilight had passed.

"It's too dark," he murmured, and he turned back to the Nightmare to place a hand on either side of its oversized jaw. "Hey big guy, Can you light a fire?"

The burgundy dragon gave a long, low purr. Hiccup laughed, and rubbed the crease of its nose with
affection. "Thanks."

Astrid watched in morbid fascination as Hiccup embraced the oversized jaw of the dragon. Its mouth. This man was crazy.

The Nightmare pulled from Hiccup's caress and sidled away with a dragging tail.

"Is it actually going to...to light a fire?"

"Yeah," Hiccup grinned, turning to catch the Timberjack around the mouth next. It had taken to nuzzling Hiccup's shoulder with its sharp brow, seeking equal affection to its companion. "I showed them how we stack logs to keep one going, but they never seem to manage it right."

He said this all while staring the Timberjack in its circular eyes. He scratched under its jaw and smoothed his palms along the curved horns with gentle, firm strokes.

Astrid thought it amazing how at ease he seemed surrounded by all these dragons. They greeted him as she would greet her father after a long voyage.

The Timberjack suddenly poked its head over Hiccup's shoulder, with a neck that extended far beyond what she read about. It regarded her using bright, yellow eyes that soused her in a similar hypnotic affect to the Night Fury's.

"Is that a..."

"Timberjack, yeah. Here," Hiccup reached up and began to guide the Timberjack under the chin while extending a hand out to her, "they love those human fingers—"

Astrid, about to say no, jerked back when the Timberjack pressed its snout forward, beyond Hiccup's lead and straight toward her chest. She felt her hip bump into the Night Fury's hindquarters.

"Easy," Hiccup warned the olive-colored beast with a low, commanding voice.

::The female is not like him:: Toothless informed the other using sharp tones. ::She's timid and jumpy. She won't—wait, what? ...I don't care if you think she smells nice!:: Hiccup snorted. ::Let her approach you, you bent-tailed—::

The Timberjack curled a lip and started to growl.

"Guys..." Hiccup droned, already having had to intervene on one too many fights between the pair. The rather mild-mannered Nightmare easily avoided confrontation, but the Timberjack and Night Fury seemed to bear some innate distaste for one another.

"What—?" Astrid started to ask, but the sudden flash and noise of a flame jettison alarmed an audible gasp from her lips. The immediate area was suddenly alight with the lingering flame of a Nightmare upon a shoddy pile of sticks.

Hiccup winced at her sharp reaction, though he couldn't blame her in the slightest. The Timberjack looked more menacing than before; the sharp edges of its wings now gleamed as brightly as any man-made battle blade, the distinct, spindly structure of it's backbone and pinions arched demonically.

"You don't have to be scared," he urged her with a palm caressing the side of the dragon's neck. "He's good. He's a nice dragon—"
"I'm not scared," Astrid threw in quickly. Perhaps it was his thoughtless words, but she suddenly appeared more inclined to approach the overly curious Timberjack. She cautioned forward with hesitant fingers to slowly reach toward the snout.

Hiccup could feel the eagerness and anxiety in the Timberjack's neck. It wanted to meet her halfway, desperate to get to know this interesting, new human.

"Let her come to you," he murmured into part of its head where he believed its ears to be.

Astrid's unblinking stare switched between he and the dragon with every step to the Timberjack, giving Hiccup the impression that she felt equally wary towards both of them. She never seemed to make any progress and yet she was there before she knew it, an outsider to her own body as she watched her outstretched hand close the distance to those glinting scales. The tips of her fingers brushed the ridge of the Timberjack's nose and for all of Astrid's bluster, she could not hide the tremble of them.

Astrid released a harsh breath between her teeth when her skin made contact with the tightly packed scales. Hiccup's whispers to the dragon drifted into the background. She was prepared to snap her hand back to her chest should it bear a single fang towards her.

It sniffed with exaggerated nostril flares; she could feel the alternating hot air and cool pulls as it scented her. The eyes were large and strangely circular, with pupils so wide they appeared round themselves.

On the whole, its face was, dare she say, cute.

Unlike the Night Fury's smooth and angular head, the Timberjack's narrow skull was lined with fine ridges all along its brow and bottom jaw. Astrid began to smooth her palm up and down the long nose bridge.

She felt the vibrations before the sound registered to her.

"It's...is it...?"

"They purr, yeah." Hiccup stroked the Timberjack along the underside of its neck with lazy, familiar motions, and on his face was the biggest grin Astrid had seen yet. She didn't know if it was the endearing cat-like behavior of the beast, or the fact that she willingly chose to touch a dragon at his discretion, but Hiccup's mood only became more and more agreeable.

Astrid frowned, unsettled by how the night had gone so far, and even more so by the behavior of these dragons. This was...this was nothing like she ever thought possible. She almost wanted to get angry at this beast for acting like a common house pet.

She'd killed these. They'd killed her people. And now she pet one. It was a live, feeling, sentient being, with scales just as warm as the blood she'd spilled. It looked at her with an intelligence she refused to acknowledge in the past; it looked at her like the only difference between them was their skin.

"Are they all this...friendly?"

Hiccup laughed. The smile had hardly left his face since they arrived on the small island.

"Not at all," He assured her. "They're just as diverse as people are. Some are friendly, some are not. It took a while to get Toothless to trust me."
"With good reason:: Toothless mentioned using carefully chosen words.

"Yeah," Hiccup mumbled. The smile slipped from his face as the cold and sudden remembrance of Toothless' limited options came to mind.

Toothless moved from behind Astrid and bumped his head against the young man's vested chest.

"No regrets here::

"Thanks, bud."

The impression of Astrid's stare told him he had lost sense of his surroundings, again.

"Ah, erm..." Hiccup cleared his throat. "Yeah, it took a bit of work to get where we are now... But these guys were freed from the control," he swept a hand from the Timberjack to the Nightmare, who had curled up by the fire, "and that's given them a reason to trust me. I've worked with them enough to warm them to humans. They know I'd never bring anyone that would hurt them."

Astrid cocked an eyebrow. "What makes you think I wouldn't hurt them?"

She continued her delicate stroke of the Timberjack's nose. So far, the dragon surprised Hiccup by not pressing Astrid for a more aggressive show of affection. Perhaps he could pick up her anxiety without needing Toothless to point it out to him.

Hiccup shrugged one shoulder. He reached out and caressed a patch of loosening scales on the Timberjacks' neck. "Because you're relatively reasonable. I mean, if I can't get through to you, I don't think there's much hope for Berk."

This wasn't entirely accurate. Astrid was one of the many he thought would fight any change the hardest. Alongside his father.

"Do you really think you'll manage it?" Astrid asked, willing to drop their niceties for a more frank subject.

Hiccup regarded the fires for a moment.

"Getting Berk to help? Probably."

"No, I mean saving us."

He pulled his gaze away from the dragon, a little startled by the direction she just pulled them in.

"Oh, well, er, not alone..." Hiccup finally articulated. His eyes flicked to Astrid and then to the attentions of his hand on the Timberjack. A moment of indecisiveness passed before he pressed on. "I've seen it. ...the demon. I really have no idea how to do this...this whole 'saving Berk thing'. I need help."

He felt like he said it twenty times that night, but he continued to hope he would get a more positive response if he continued.

"Talk to Fish. I'm sure the two of you could figure something out."

He appeared entirely surprised. "Fishlegs?"

Astrid nodded. "He's the one who started backing you up with evidence Berk would believe. He's probably the reason you were allowed to meet with the chief in the first place."
Hiccup's head turned back to the fire, this time with a tiny smile to alight his features.

"I'll have to thank him."

The warmth and pull of the Nightmare’s fire attracted him too greatly to stay in the dark corners of a chilling night. He jerked his head toward the heat. "Come on."

Astrid stared mutely at him for a moment, as though not understanding his request. She looked at him, then at the fire encircled by a haphazard barrier of rocks, and an entirely different message than what Hiccup aimed for stuck her.

Already, she realized, she had spent too much time in his company—. She could feel her mind shutting down, starting with getting on the back of a Night Fury and hitting the skids from there. Allowing herself to pet a Timberjack was nearly too much. She needed time to process this—she didn't like feeling so off-kilter that she'd go along with any request; she liked having a set of ideals and sticking to them.

"I should get home..." It was more than feeling pressured to accept too much, too fast. It just occurred to Astrid what people might think if they last saw her disappearing into the forest right when the chief set out to meet with Hiccup.

"Just for a couple drinks," the young nomad called, already moving towards a previously unrealized pile of belongings near the fire circle.

Astrid felt her tongue thrash for words as he bent over to root through a canvas pack.

"Drinks...?"

The Timberjack moved unexpectedly, curling around her and nudging at her shoulder with the crest of its head. She instinctively jumped away with a loud gasp, closer to Hiccup. She only just caught herself from drawing her short sword.

"What's it doing?"

"He wants you to get over here." Hiccup stood from his rooting, a large waterskin in hand. "Relax, the moon's only just shown up."

Astrid pursed her lips, hating the perceived coercion.

Though she did stiffly shuffle towards the fire, making sure to keep one eye on the Timberjack, she had to deliver a withering, "Don't tell me to relax."

Really, she should be awarded for how patient she had been that night.

"Sorry," Hiccup mechanically responded, only managing to sound half-apologetic. He pulled the stopper, leaned back, and took in a mouthful of some mysterious liquid. When he pulled it away, Astrid caught a shine to his lips before he licked it off. The waterskin was held out to her in her final steps to his side.

"What is it?" Astrid questioned in a flat voice. She made no move to take it.

"Gooseberry Ale from Circinn," Hiccup said. He pushed the drink closer to Astrid until she finally accepted the pouch.

She had never heard of such a town, and she had only been exposed to Berk's home mead or imports
from visiting ships, but the challenge was there in his face.

Keeping her eyes on the presenter, Astrid gently tilted the rawhide mouthpiece to her lips and allowed the first sip of drink to trickle onto her tongue.

It tasted...rather good. Certainly stronger than her usual drink; not as sweet as mead but bearing a fruity twang to it.

The first question tumbled from her lips before she finished processing the savor.

"You can afford this?"

Hiccup laughed and lowered himself to kneel in front of the fire. Astrid felt her own knees fold alongside of his, though she hadn't given them permission to do so.

"Why does everyone think I'm living in poverty?" His voice was teasing, which lay to rest any chance of him taking offense. He scratched his neck. "I probably could, I've made a good amount of money doing odd jobs. Though this I had taken—mind you, it was stolen by bandits—so, really, I'm not the guilty party here. I'm sure whoever made this would have much rather we drink it than the people who likely killed them."

And Astrid was hooked.

Maybe it was the darkness, the peculiar company of creatures that wouldn't spill her secrets, or maybe it was because Hiccup had such a strange mix of foreigner and familiarity, but Astrid felt like she could be completely open in her feelings—her curiosity, her envy, her longing...all could be released. A little bit more of that pinch to her temples let out as one less thing to control tumbled from her care.

Now she faced the problem of figuring out where to start.

"What sort of jobs?" she asked. Instead of returning the waterskin, she helped herself to another draft.

Hiccup betrayed his shock with the slackening of his face.

"Ah, erm, well, some blacksmithing, obviously. I had some retrieval jobs when people learned how fast I could travel or how stealthy I could be. Living with a dragon and being stationary for too long got risky, and people don't trust too easy as it is out there. Sometimes it made more sense to just take stuff, especially in the woods were not very many...civil people lived."

She did nothing to hide her surprise. "You stole a lot of stuff?"

With a flat face, Hiccup pulled the flask back to himself, meeting some resistance.

"I stole only stolen stuff," he asserted. "Anything else I left compensation for."

Astrid smiled. Unprepared, Hiccup felt himself lean back on his heels when she bared her teeth at him without threat or anger. The grinning woman took advantage of his brief lapse in composure by dragging the waterskin back to her side.

"What's it like on the road?" She asked with all the eagerness of a child on the eve of Jul. "I can't believe you survived out there..."

Then Hiccup smiled back at her.
"It's great. I mean, there are certain regional rules you need to learn and abide by, but once you figure out when *not* to make eye contact, or how to communicate without giving away you're a foreigner, you start to enjoy doing what you want. You learn so much about the world just by encountering people who are different than you; it really helps put into perspective how diverse the world is. As for survival...it's kind of a sink or swim situation there. I know Vikings are really 'brawn over brains' around here...but for everywhere else? Knowing how to use your words can often be even more effective than weapons—that's what I learned, anyway."

Hiccup paused then, a little bewildered by how much he just blurted out, at how easy he found speaking of his travels naught three sips into his ale supply. At how Astrid listened with genuine interest, no longer interrupting—not even when he mentioned the Vikings.

"Also, it helps that I have a Night Fury watching my back," he added as an afterthought. The dragon snorted and gave an exaggerated eye-roll even Astrid could follow.

::*I imagine its like having hatchlings::*

Hiccup gave Toothless a rough rub on the top of his head.

"You love me."

::*I tolerate you for the scratches. A little to the left, please::*

"You can understand him," Astrid stated with abrupt comprehension. Her eyes appeared lucid in the firelight and, as opposed to earlier when Hiccup thought he'd never get through that barrier of brainwashing and tradition, now he felt she saw him too clearly.

"Ah...yeah," he slowly answered, afraid this ease he had just gotten her to fall into would vanish at the confirmation. Amazingly, Astrid nodded.

"You've probably been through a lot together," she observed with more sympathy than he'd ever guess she possessed. Seeming to pick up on his shock, Astrid went on, "Sometimes Lout and I can convey messages across a battlefield without anything being need said. And, I suppose, to a lesser extent, the twins and me. We usually work in the same unit..." her voice trailed, words slowing as she worried over how to convey a message that never had to be verbalized before. "Sometimes...when you're put under stress with the same people..."

"...you create a bond beyond words," Hiccup finished softly.

Astrid's face lightened, pleasantly surprised to find he knew precisely what she spoke of.

"Yes."

Hiccup returned to stroking Toothless' brow—favoring the left side of it—with his own crinkled in worry. To create such a strong, silent understanding between individuals...that was a bond, alright. He couldn't remember which, if he even know that much about bonds to begin with, but he did know that what Astrid spoke of was a bond borne from a unified front against dragons.

"That's...it's not going to be easy getting them to see dragons as anything but an enemy," he murmured.

The Timberjack warbled low in its throat from its curl near the fire. Astrid only jumped at the sound,
no longer edging away. Instead, she stole another sip from the waterskin as though using the drink as a
clutch and a distraction for an otherwise uncomfortable situation. Despite the somber subject, Hiccup had to crack an amused grin because he had no idea she enjoyed the drink so much. He shouldn't have been surprised; for as long as she participated in raids, Astrid probably drank afterwards just as often. She was a true Viking now.

"It's been brutal," the girl agreed. "But if you introduce dragons and flying, like you did to me, they..."

She trailed off when Hiccup began shaking his head.

"I can't give everyone a ride," he said. "Not the way I did with you, anyway. That took far too much
convincing to make a habit of it."

Toothless rested his head on his front paws with a long, croaking groan. ::Too right. She weighed far
more than what you implied she would. Nothing like the fairy female::

Astrid cocked her head, oblivious to Toothless' comments.

"How so?"

::And I expect every herring, haddock and cod you promised me::

Hiccup started pushing on Toothless' head, trying to get him to shut up as he grimaced in thought.

"Let's just say he doesn't like being treated like a horse—"

::::three fish for every stone she weighed. There shall be compensation for the kicking and
screaming, of course::

Hiccup's free hand rubbed the back of his neck.

"A general meeting with the Vikings and him... Maybe have you vouch for him...that's what will
have to happen. People can discover flight on their own."

Astrid hissed and winced, clearly not liking the idea.

"That sounds a little risky," she commented.

"Well I did it, so I'm sure it's not impossible for others to do it either. Sure they'll fall a few times, and
finding harmony with any being—even another human—takes work and compromise—"

::—and they better be fresh, because—::

Hiccup's patience for the little voice heckling him from the side cracked.

"Shhh!"

Toothless' tail whipped up to smack Hiccup across the head before the rider even realized he had
shushed his own dragon.

"Ow! What—?"

::Don't you silence me, you lun-a-tic!::

"I'm speaking to someone else, you—just—stop—!" Hiccup began batting the tail away that came
sweeping in for a second hit.

Toothless bared his teeth. ::Just because she can't understand me, doesn't mean you can ignore me —::

"You'll get your fish—will you relax? I'm busy—!"

A soft snort returned the boys' attention to their third member. Astrid had leaned forward to rest a hand on her palm, elbow on her knee, and that's when Hiccup realized she had moved into a cross-legged position sometime in the warming of the conversation. She watched them with relaxed amusement; the flask held in her other hand and poised for action.

"Well, he's no horse, that's for sure," she remarked wryly. She paused to take a longer drink, already comfortable with the new ale. Her lips smacked. "He seems awfully full of himself."

Toothless pulled his tail away from Hiccup so that he could arrange himself regally. ::I have every right to be::

Hiccup continued rubbing the slight smart in his head, his face rueful.

"Yes, well, most dragons are very prideful, stubborn, powerful..." His gaze drifted to meet Astrid's with the firelight heating the right side of his face.

The woman smiled back at him, amusement jumping in her eyes with every licking flame reflected back at him.

"Sounds familiar."

There was something so teasing, so comforting, about the way she said it that Hiccup wondered if this was the girl her battle-brothers knew, if the taste of alcohol and a warm fire drew Astrid into a familiar enough setting to let loose.

Unfortunately...her rigid personality was one of the things he counted on using to keep his wits about him.

Hiccup cleared his throat and shrugged using the same lightness directed at him.

"Could just be the region."

She nodded, grin widening. "Us northern breeds."

"Most stereotypes for the south are completely right, you know," Hiccup tossed out conversationally. He leaned forward and returned the waterskin to his possession. "Wimps."

He watched her eyebrow arch, somehow predicting the action. Hiccup Haddock just called someone a wimp.

"Oh really?"

"Mmm," Hiccup bobbed his head through his swallow. "They were even scared of me when they found out I was a Northman. Me. And that was without Toothless standing right behind me."

"You are kind of scary looking," Astrid granted him, likely not even realizing what she just acknowledged. "That bow..." Something read as off as she drank in his appearance. The harness, the dagger in his belt... "Where's your bow?"
The abrupt change of subject startled Hiccup for but a moment; "I left it in the cove."

Astrid sat up straighter. Her eyes cleared from their comfortable fog.

That sounded sinful to her.

She stared at him like he was mad. "A bow like that? Aren't you afraid someone's going to take it?"

Hiccup laughed deeply. She could see his stomach bounce beneath his tunic.

"No. She's very testy about touching."

"She?"

"Framherja."

Astrid didn't know why it shocked her so much that he named the bow. Her mother named her axe before she bequeathed it to her. As per tradition, she was meant to learn the name on her wedding day.

That would never happen now.

Astrid quickly and forcibly turned her thoughts away from that subject; she was tired of feeling angry. She felt good now, relaxed. She decided before she even settled by the fire that she liked this lighthearted feeling. It wasn't something she could entertain everyday, but it felt healthy in small doses.

"Pretty," she pitched, cinching out the slight strangle in her tenor. "How did you come up with that?"

"I didn't."

Her eyebrows rose for the umpteenth time that evening.

"Did a woman name it?"

"No," Hiccup said, finding it a strange question. "She came with the name."

Astrid felt a wave of annoyance wash over her at his difficulty in giving her a straight answer.

"You're not going to tell me how you got it?"

"Mm, maybe one day. In the far, far future. Provided we ever make it to that point." And before she could ask, Hiccup sternly emphasized, "It is mine. Meant for me. Not stolen."

She sighed.

"Well, did you meet anyone? While you were out there?"

Why she asked that, she did not know. The name intrigued her—everything about the weapon did, and the fact that he would not answer her outright was suspect.

Astrid watched a slow smile work its way across Hiccup' face.

"Sure," he said, simply. "Out there is full of anyones."

By Thor, had he always been this evasive? She had no memories to answer that for her; she hadn't actually had many conversations with him.
"You know what I mean."

He did, but he couldn't bring himself to answer.

"I guess," he said. His eyes darted to Toothless, who had rested his head on the ground in the pretense of sleeping. A single, green eye had cracked open to watch him.

"Did the dragon ruin your game?"

Hiccup returned his focus to Astrid, flat faced. "The dragon gave me game."

Then Hiccup thought about what he unthinkingly said and realized Merciful Gods, he did.

For a moment, Astrid couldn't say anything for all Hiccup just implied.

"Ruffnut's getting married," she announced, with another sudden topic change. The expression on her face told Hiccup that she hadn't expected the words to pop from her mouth the way they did.

Hiccup's shock at the content of the announcement commanded his mind for the length of a single, slow blink. Then his attention moved to other implications.

"Not you?"

"Hah! No."

Astrid grabbed the gooseberry ale from him, and Hiccup felt so bothered by her empty smile that he relinquished it without any playful resistance. "It's kind of sad really."

"That no one's asked?"

It sounded...impossible to Hiccup. More impossible than ever sharing drinks around a fire with Astrid Hofferson. More impossible that he would ever break through her bluster to find a girl who clearly needed an out.

She gave a dry chuckle and took a long swill of ale.

"No. It's what happens when they do." She fell back on her elbow, rather dramatically, stretched out like a cat. "I'm cursed!"

Hiccup didn't know if he was allowed to smile or not. Sad as her claim was, he had difficulty taking it seriously.

"Cursed, huh?"

"Mmm." She rubbed a hand over her eyes. "Anyone who asks...bam. Dead. Usually within a month's time." She sat up straight again for another sip. She wiped the sticky liquid left in the corner of her mouth with the back of her hand. "At first it was kind of relieving, you know? Sad, of course, for the families, but I was off the hook." She waved her hand. "Then it got annoying. Insulting, actually. In the beginning I...I didn't want to be left behind. Everyone—all the girls of my age were being arranged—I mean, Ruff's getting married before me—and I know it's horrible to be so annoyed by it, but soon I'll be one of those old crones that kids whisper about...

"Not that I looking forward to the whole marriage thing—there's no one I really want either—but it was just expected, you know? I mean, what would people say if Astrid Hofferson never married? Everything seems to balance on my reputation and I-I don't know if I hate it or love it anymore."
She didn’t know why she spoke so frankly. She couldn’t seem to stop. It felt good.

Astrid stared at the mouthpiece of the flask they shared, wet and sticky and shining in the firelight, and sighed.

"I would have such...such beautiful children!" she moaned. "I don't even think I want them, but they’d be strong—the greatest little Vikings ever—I have all the right breeding behind me. I have the strength to carry child and battle until the last couple months—"

Hiccup listened to the blonde warrior with lifted eyebrows as she spoke more words in one sitting than he ever heard from her in his entire life on Berk. Occasionally he would share a bewildered glance with Toothless.

He coughed when she paused to take a breath. "Do you...do you want to get married?"

"Do I—?" She stopped short. Her fingertips came to touch the arch of her cheek where her skin felt hot. "Well, its not so much a matter of want, is it? I mean...I'm supposed to. I... It's just proper. Do you know the shame I'd face? Well, maybe not shame, but, surely, people would be disappointed..."

Hiccup continued to stare at her, probably waiting for a more satisfactory answer that Astrid couldn't quite form into words.

Soon enough, she groaned, "Ugh, I don't know...I don't know what I'm doing, or what I want—"

She blinked at the sudden admission. Why was she saying this? Astrid glanced down at the waterskin and gave it a few light shakes. It felt half empty.

"That doesn't sound like you," Hiccup mentioned.

Annoyed with her momentary lapse of control, more so with the way Hiccup now looked at her as though he had expected someone different sitting next to him, Astrid scowled. "You don't even know me."

The outlaw looked away for a moment, his focus moved to the crumbling silhouettes of logs behind a curtain of flame.

"Guess I don't, huh?"

He never had. He only dreamed of how he thought the iconic Viking should be—self-assured, levelheaded, open-minded, fair...

In a flight's time, Hiccup found a depth to Astrid Hofferson all his years of dreaming could never reach. Here was a girl his mind had no control in molding, and she came as flawed and imperfect as every other human roaming Midgard.

"I'm sorry," he found himself blurting out.

She didn't ask for what—if for his presumptions, his scaring her on the flight, or for making her feel inadequate during the last two years.

She couldn't bring herself to say 'sorry' back; she wouldn't be sorry for any of her actions for the same reasons he wouldn't be sorry for his.

Astrid looked at the flask held lose in her hand. She thought of how odd it was that Hiccup turned out to be such a casual drinker, that he figured out his own way of twisting arms and using force to
then it suddenly struck Astrid how pro-active Hiccup grew to be compared to the boy she thought would forever hide in a blacksmith's shop. He did come back.

"Turns out, no one really knew you," she returned.

"No one wanted to know me," Hiccup pointed out. "For the best, probably. They were right to say I'd never be a Viking."

He loved his life; he'd never regret his choices. Following Toothless, helping Toothless... He was stronger than people realized and he felt more alive and awake than he thought he would ever experience so why did it still bother him to mention that?

Unthinkingly, Hiccup returned the ale to his possession, because his tongue thirsted for it and the discomfort of his reception on Berk demanded medicine.

He tipped the drink to his mouth, hyperaware of Astrid's eyes on him. Damn, he couldn't even taste it anymore.

"Is that why you..." Astrid began, but then decided to change directions. Squinting at the fire, she asked, "Why didn't you just kill him?"

She didn't need to elaborate on who "him" was. Not when her eyes darted to Toothless. The black dragon merely flicked an ear in her direction, acting as though he couldn't understand the question.

Hiccup swallowed with a noncommittal grunt.

"At that point in my life? I had nothing left to lose."

Toothless' body heat warmed his back and hip, acting as a comfort and soother.

"What was wrong with your life?" asked Astrid, blankly.

Hiccup couldn't stop the derisive laugh that followed. It bubbled up from his chest like the hollow remnants of his childhood acrimony looking for an escape, an outlet, whenever the opportunity arose.

"You don't remember a damn thing about me, do you?"

"You used to have a crush on me," Astrid reminded him, calmly.

He wasn't surprised she knew of that; it was probably the only real thing she remembered about him. How he made a fool of himself over her.

"A lot of guys did," he pointed out, just as evenly.

"And now most of them are dead."

"You're real torn up about that, aren't you?" Great, now he felt annoyed at her for not giving him the time of day...or any other guy for that matter. He could tell now, having talked to her on even footing, that, while Astrid was focused on fighting, she also simply wasn't interested. She wasn't going to waste her time on letting someone down. She'd continue to let them make fools of themselves until they got the hint. She couldn't be bothered with any of it if it didn't directly appeal to her.
He held her in such esteem back then that he refused to see it as anything other than perfect focus.

She pursed her lips at his snarky response.

"I told you, it got old. I felt bad at first—a little for myself, but mostly for them. It just kept happening and happening until people thought it was a death wish to so much as speak to my father."

Astrid had that look about her—like she was thinking of going for the waterskin again—so Hiccup hugged held it a little closer to his chest. She'd become more and more open as she drank, but there was a very good chance she had a violent streak stashed away in there somewhere that one sip too many would unleash.

Gods, he made such amazing progress with her. He desperately wished for nothing to set them back.

"Maybe everything happens for a reason." He aimed for a neutrality to squash out the negative energy starting to kick up.

The stare she gave him was unreadable, to say the least.

"Maybe none of them were a suitable husband for me?" She suggested, and her voice, coupled with that look, had Hiccup blushing.

"No—that's not what I—"

"Or maybe I was only meant to be just a warrior?"

"Um..."

Hiccup missed when the Timberjack moved; once curled a ways from the fire, it now peacefully rested behind Astrid—not quite touching, but close enough so that a simple stretch of its neck would bring its head within her reach.

"Maybe I shouldn't have run," Astrid murmured. Her voice was a tad detached, like one would sound halfway into a daydream. Her eyes flicked to the flask, but Hiccup would not rise to the bait.

"You're here now...and you're handling this awfully well. I thought you'd be the hardest to convince."

"Maybe I was waiting for it all along," Astrid said. She continued to be breathy in her short, vague responses. She could almost put a name to that feeling now, that unloading of stress and responsibility, which started with her arms around Hiccup's waist and her cheek against his back. The softness of clouds slipping between her fingers and lifted sensation in her stomach from seeing her entire life on Berk miniaturized and thrown into perspective. The purr of a dragon that looked at her with kind eyes. That lack of control, not replaced with degradation or helplessness like she'd always expected.

That feeling of knowing she could rely on someone to be strong with her...it kind of felt like hope.

Hiccup gave Astrid half a grin, and took another short sip of gooseberry ale. "Think you know what you want now?"

Her nod came first. Then the words.

"I just want to help our village."

She said it knowing it to be the first time she ever had to verbalize the objective. Everyone before
had assumed it.

"Is that all you want?" Hiccup asked, and the sheer focus he pushed on her, the intensity in which he watched for an answer, had Astrid staring at him for a moment.

The firelight danced in her wide eyes, flecks of orange contrasted so starkly with the blue of her irises that Hiccup could pick out a dozen colors in between. The highlights of her hair teased him just as they did when he was a boy.

A budding confidence sucked away, leaving Hiccup so precariously empty inside he had to look away from her.

For the first time since the cove he didn't see Astrid as the Viking who drove him out from his home. He saw her as the crush he used to dream about.

He quickly pulled the flask to his lips, using the tang as a distraction.

She was different from the girl of his fantasies, of course. Older. Harder. He could see some scars on her shoulders, her neck, and knew more existed below her clothes. She showed them off proudly. Everything about her was proud. She had grown well, with more defined muscles in her arms and a broader flesh to her body that many Vikings worked on to survive the winters. She was a survivor too, but, unlike him, she looked the part. Astrid didn't look like she needed a Night Fury to watch her back.

::You've gotta be kidding me::

Hiccup coughed a bit, jerking the waterskin from his mouth. He stared down at the dragon.

"What?"

::You have a taste for the sun-haired ones, don't you? Is that it?::

"What?"

"What's he saying?"

Hiccup's head swiveled back to Astrid and he desperately wished for the night air to cool his cheeks.

"Nothing!" he yelped. He took a fast, deep breath and repeated, more calmly. "Nothing. He's just being..." he glared at the dragon, "Toothless."

Toothless, eyes still closed, smiled without teeth.

Hiccup rolled his eyes at the insolence, but Astrid's short giggle had him in a much calmer position. He settled back to rest his weight on his palms.

"What I meant was: what are you willing to do to help Berk?"

Astrid shifted her chin forward a midge, rolling the question over in her mind.

"What do you have in mind?" she asked.

"The only way we can win this war is if we address the problem. The real problem."

She leaned forward. Business was a comfortable subject for her.
"How?"

"How do you like that Timberjack?"

Astrid blinked. She twisted in her seat, eyeing the slumbering beast. Its neck was stretched and turned at a weird angle, taking up unnecessary floor room the way a teenager would stretch out across an entire bed.

"For something so sharp, he's awfully...cuddly."

Hiccup sipped at the ale, nodding, and then offered it to Astrid.

"I knocked him out of the control," he stated when his mouth cleared. "Either Timberjacks typically have a sweet disposition or just this one, but his personality has emerged a little more every day since I freed him."

::He's a brat::

"Ah, he...is young..." Hiccup translated, shooting an unsure look at Toothless, missed by the Night Fury in his sleeping position. "Anyway, step one would be dwindling down on the army. As in, knocking them out of the demon's range. I'll need more riders for that to be effective. I'm hoping to get some volunteers willing to learn how to ride a dragon, and then when everyone sees how awesome it is, they'll be willing to jump in as well. The more we knock out, the less damaging their raids will be."

Astrid looked at the Timberjack again; Hiccup could see the intrigue and reserve battle on her features.

"And how do you know the dragons won't turn on us as soon as we free them?"

"It is a possibility," he conceded, not sharing her face of concern. "They'll certainly attack while still under control. There's really no telling how they'll behave out of it. Maybe I've just been lucky with the three I have, but it's definitely worth the chance. Wouldn't you want someone to risk your wrath if it meant regaining your freedom again?"

The answer was so obvious Astrid didn't bother replying. She peered into the mouthpiece of the waterskin, maybe so she didn't have to look at anything but the blackness.

"I'll work with you," Hiccup promised her. "You'll be able to evade any rage-filled dragons. The closer you get to a dragon, the more he'll want to protect you, and vice versa. Some day you'll be able to read the body-language of that Timberjack so well you'll make a greater pair together than you ever were separately."

Astrid regarded him with her lingering misgivings.

"How do you know the Timberjack will even let me ride him?"

"He chose you."

"How do you know I want to ride him?"

"You chose him."

"How do you know?" She didn't dispute him. She honestly wanted an answer.

"I'm a dragon rider," Hiccup responded with a wide, wide smile. "I can just tell."
Astrid tried to keep up her impatience with his evasion but she found it hard in the face of such boyishness. It wasn't so annoying this time, not when applied to something as serious as a war. Ironically enough, when someone spoke of war and tactics lightly, she received the impression that they were simply confident—and, to an extent, competent—enough to relax the issue. Hiccup may not have been around for the war in the last couple of years, but he seemed to really understand the dragons in a way unseen before.

"And how do we deal with the demon?"

Hiccup started to frown. It was a question he continued to struggle with. "Well...I have some theories, but I think its best if we take that up with the rest of Berk once we've lain everything out on the table. At least with the army-lopping we can make things easier for Berk and those raids."

"Yeah, they've g-go—," Astrid yawned, "—ten pretty brutal.

The hour came to Hiccup's attention like a cold awakening.

"You need to get back," he announced, craning his neck back to see the moon had already peaked in the sky. Where had all the time gone?

Astrid didn't argue, but she didn't jump to her feet either. She slowly pushed herself up, dusting her leggings off while Hiccup shook Toothless' shoulder.

"Come on, buddy." Hiccup pressed. The dragon may have weighed as much as a small ship for all the damage Hiccup managed. Toothless released a long groan.

::I was actually starting to fall asleep there:: he complained, giving a tongue curling yawn that put Astrid's to shame.

"Sorry bud, but we got quite a night a head of us."

::I know, I know. I was just so bored::

Toothless managed to stand, placing one paw to the ground at the time and heaving his body upward. Hiccup rose with the movement as though he were another wing.

"Where are you staying?" she asked, blinking some of the oncoming drowsiness from her eyes.

"With your dad?"

Hiccup glanced up from tightening a strap on Toothless' harness.

"Hmmm?" Her suggestion seemed so outlandish that it took him a while for it to register. "Oh, no. I'll be in the village tomorrow morning, though. I have some things to do."

Astrid nodded; her sudden weariness pushed from her mind the fact that he did not answer her first question. A rush from the alcohol heated her head with her shift in elevation. The new taste was addicting, the power of it unknown. She had an inkling that she wouldn't be at her best come tomorrow.

"Come on."

She blinked again, finding Hiccup back on the saddle. He belonged there, she realized—the warmth in her head filled the rest of her body with the speed of running water and the thickness of molasses—he belonged on a dragon.
This time, she didn't hesitate to take Hiccup's hand as he hoisted her onto the saddle.

Something about that bow, about that dragon, about him...

Maybe it was because he brought her closer to Asgard than she ever dreamed possible, or because he could understand dragons like no human could, or maybe it was the gooseberry ale, but with her arms wrapped around him, Astrid felt something otherworldly in her grasp. She felt like she was holding onto a greater destiny. She wanted to feel that again, and again, and again, because it felt like an answer. The answer to every insecurity that haunted her before this night.

It felt like freedom, possibly the same sort of freedom lying just beyond the reach of all those nest-bound dragons. Maybe they even knew it was there, but never reached for it because they deemed it unattainable. Like it hurt less to ignore.

She stole one last look at the pair of dragons snoozing in the dying fire. The Timberjack appeared dead to the world, so deep in its slumber it probably would not register her absence until the sun arose.

"Ready?"

Hiccup and Toothless both did that shifting thing she recalled as necessary before taking off, and she prepared to be airborne once more. She hugged him tighter, so warm, so at peace with the world, that the beating of his heart against her wrist hadn't registered as anything but soothing.

"Ready," she whispered into the cloth of his shirt.

Wind and senselessness and vertigo surrounded her in the next moment. She didn't cower. She didn't tuck her head. She turned her face to the sky and allowed the chill of the night to battle her heated blood. Her chin rested on Hiccup's shoulder, and her eyelids fluttered shut to the soft strokes of his hair on her cheeks.

This man in her hold...by Freyja, this man was going to change their world. And she planned on being right in the middle of it.

Chapter End Notes

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I won't tell you how many words this was...or how many pages...I just couldn't seem to bring myself to break it up. There's a lot that needs to happen for Hiccup and Astrid to get along. They need to hash things out in their own way—Astrid more physically, Hiccup verbally. It's been my downtime to write this, and I've enjoyed it a lot, and it all just kind of flowed out as naturally as possible for me. I'm sorry if readers found it too jarring (their interactions, or Astrid's transition) but I can't apologize for how I've had these characters develop. Feel free to send me your heart-felt beliefs on their characters.
Chapter Summary

Hiccup addresses Berk and in the process finds unlikely support and meets someone he never thought he'd have the chance to.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Integrated

Krankr footslogged through the village with hoary legs to struggle along Berk's rocky paths and lungs to enjoy the sea breeze. His feet knew the route so well that it made no difference that first light was still some time away. On this island, a day started long before the sun decided to drag its lazy arse over the horizon.

The ocean's greeting had not changed once in all his fifty-two years; the gentle crashing of waves, call of the gulls, and creaks of the docks all welcomed Krankr into a new day. Salt scented so strongly in the air that he could taste it, and already the stickiness that clouded every summer breath made his trek home more uncomfortable than usual. His limb-stiffies always acted up in this humidity. Of course, if he moved any higher in the Archipelagos it'd likely be too cold for his poor joints. Such testiness. Just like his wife—Odin, rest her soul.

The limb-stiffies really had him out the night before, so he had to skip the mandatory meeting called when the chief returned from his summit with the Outlaw. Krankr's participation in a lot of village activities had been lacking as of late—a real tragedy considering how chaotic their war had gotten. If he were only ten years younger he could show these striplings how to really kill a dragon...

His daughter-in-law, Kernella, promised to inform him of the decision reached this morning, but it turned out Krankr didn't have to wait. Already he'd passed by one-too-many conversations; whispered excitement charged the air more readily than the sun could.

The Outlaw would come to their village today.

Krankr had to wonder if their chief had finally lost his marbles. Not in his day would an outlawed man be allowed to walk the grounds once more. Not for crimes of that sort—the unspeakable sort.

Krankr shook his head, heedless of his grumbling. His worries these days leaned more toward his lack of cane than the downhill management of their village. With any luck he'd be dead soon anyway.

He journeyed over the crest of their village, where the highest class built their homes. Nelly still slept when he left, but his early-morning walk had been a long one; hopefully she'd be awake and ready give him more details of the Thing last night by the time his uppity legs brought him home.

Wishful thinking. Those brats of hers were nearly grown, yet the pair of them seemed to suck the life out of her just as well as their tot-years. Should have used the Cane on their sorry rear-ends more often—then maybe they'd hold a bit more respect for authority.
Krankr almost missed the man sitting on the stone-ledge outside of the chief's house during his bemoaning of his undisciplined grandchildren. He slowed to a stop—he didn't know this man—and openly observed the stranger. The stranger stared right back.

He was young, brushing the throes of manhood while bearing a build and complexion of a Southerner. He had oddly colored armor on his arms and an odd leather vest not commonly worn this north. Odd style of hair—decorative braids rather than a sensible singular one. Odd weaponry of a curved blade and a strung bow at rest. Odd in the way he sat on the wall in front of the Chief’s house, so brazen, even though he certainly wasn't Berkian.

He was, simply, an Odd man.

"Morning," the Oddman offered. He said it in a bright, almost falsely cheery manner, nodding his head and minutely raising his mug in salutation. Krankr questioned the sincerity behind it.

"Mornin'," Krankr returned, cautious. He didn't like strangers. And he didn't recall any new ships coming in since their last Visitors four days ago.

Oddman took a sip of his tea, looking absently content with the world as he did so. He didn't seem put-off by Krankr's plain distrust.

"Sleep well?" Oddman asked after he swallowed. Krankr noted a hint of boyishness left in that tenor, which help him to date the young man as below twenty winters.

"Well enough." Krankr patted one of his hips. "Never can quite git through a night without these ol' things shockin' me awake."

Oddman nodded as if he knew exactly what Krankr spoke of and drank again. Krankr found himself craving a nice hot cuppa himself, despite how unwelcoming the idea of anything hot would be once the sun arose.

"How's your sleep?" Krankr returned politely. He usually wasn't one for small talk but this man intrigued him.

Oddman shook his head. "Haven't slept yet."

Krankr cocked a look to the horizon, where the sun would break through any time, and then looked forward again.

"Don't have much time left before th' day starts."

Oddman smiled, "Don't usually sleep until the day starts."

Krankr's frown deepened. The man's peculiarities grew the longer their conversation lasted. Where would such a man come from?

A door creaked. Krankr's ears, sharp as ever, caught the noise, and he turned his head up to see a large figure in the doorway behind them. The chief had awoken—later than usual—and now stood, stricken, staring at Oddman like someone left a frost giant on his front step.

"You should probably get going, Krankr," Oddman mumbled into his drink without so much as a glance behind him. "Things might get awkward."

The chief had started towards them with such stiff movements that Krankr feared the young fellow (by comparison) suffered from his own bout of limb-stiffies.
"Suppose I should," Krankr agreed. Clearly, the chief knew this Oddman, and he himself had no business being there. He had to go wake Nelly and learn what was to become of the Outcast.

He scurried on with a parting nod to the Oddman and a morning greeting to the chief. Chief Stoick did not acknowledge the greeting, or even Krankr's presence in general; his entire world seemed to revolve around this Oddman sitting in front of his house.

As Krankr continued on his way home he noticed a number of other farmers and fishermen slowing in their activities, each having noticed and keeping one eye on the stranger. None were close enough to carry a conversation, none seemed inclined to, but Oddman would give polite nods and smiles to anyone he made eye contact with.

Krankr glanced behind him, to where Oddman sat, now overshadowed by the hulking mass of their chief. He had never seen Stoick look more agitated or unsure of himself. It seemed to draw even more attention from the slowly rousing village.

The unusual attitude exuded by their chief distracted Krankr from the similarities in the two men's features, the set of their shoulders, the shape of their hands...

He felt like there was something his worn mind wasn't picking up.

Krankr's eyes narrowed as it came to him.

He hadn't told Oddman his name.

Or, he didn't think he had.

"Odd..." Krankr muttered, fearing his memory might be slipping along with his bones.

He shrugged, and continued on his way home to learn the fate of a chief's disgraced son.

Hiccup could sense Stoick fiddling behind him, probably feeling as diffident and lost as he did in this moment. Stoick could suddenly decide to kill him—stab him in the back the way a traitor deserved to die, or clubbed in the head, never seeing the blow coming. Or, maybe he would touch Framherja in a moment of weakness against her allure...

In spite of the uncertainty, the danger, Hiccup could not bring himself to turn around. He could hardly bring himself to look at his left knee, where his father's shadow darkened the fabric of his pants like some diluted form of touch. Hiccup felt an alarming and unanticipated lack of control. He thought the tea would help, hoped the familiar setting would calm him, and it had. For all of three sips.

"How—how long have you been there?" Stoick asked. The man winced almost as soon as the words left his mouth. After seeing his son back in their village for the first time in over two years, the greeting felt lacking. And yet, 'hello' tasted meaningless on his lips.

"Not long," Hiccup answered. He continued to stare out over the ocean like nothing else mattered.

He used to do it as a boy too, Stoick realized, and he wondered if Hiccup missed this view in his time away. He hoped for it.
The silence drew on a bit longer. Stoick didn't know for how long, or whose turn it was to speak. He felt transfixed by the length of Hiccup's hair—the same color as Valka's—the way it clawed around his shoulders when the wind blew. The way it tickled the glittering bow at his back.

That bow...Stoick longed to reach out and touch the weapon, but a deeper instinct told him that doing so was foolish. There was something about the symbols etched into the brass, the way they curled and curved into each other; so perfectly spaced, so equally measured that it was unnatural.

Either a man spent a lifetime forging that weapon, or a god did so in an instant.

Hiccup took a sip of his tea and Stoick felt awakened. One by one, the stares came to his attention. He noticed the walks that slowed as villagers passed, the whispers overturning with the gently crashing shoreline. Stoick's face darkened and, immediately, backs were turned to them.

"You were alone? Unprotected?" Stoick couldn't help but be critical.

At his feet, Hiccup stiffened.

"I can take care of myself," the young man returned, curtly. He blew gently on his drink, his actions of disinterest shielding the slight shake of his hands.

The answer did not satisfy Stoick.

"What if someone recognized you and attacked?"

"No one's come near me." Hiccup remained inscrutable. He sounded tired. Annoyed. It annoyed the chief to be treated as such.

Stoick took another step closer, moving to Hiccup's side at the very edge of the stone hedge but choosing to remain standing.

"Where's your dragon?" he asked. Already he had scanned their surroundings and continued to do so, waiting for the devil to pounce out at him, waiting for all of this to be a trap.

From the corner of his eye, Stoick saw Hiccup set his jaw forward—his classic look of determination. Or maybe it was frustration?

Stoick felt contrite with the realization that he couldn't remember.

"I can take care of myself," Hiccup repeated in a softer voice, marked by anger.

Stoick could sense quite a bit of impatience beneath that face of casual indifference, but he ignored the boy's anger in light of his own.

"This is dangerous for you, you know. That I'm even letting you in the village is something in itself, but not everyone's going to be so lenient about it—"

"Did you tell the village?" Hiccup asked curtly. "That I'm coming?"

"Yes," Stoick replied. "Everyone's been told there's a temporary alliance and that you'll be treated as a delegate for the dragons."

"And no one is supposed to attack me," Hiccup finished, settling the matter.

"That doesn't mean they won't."
"I know," Hiccup said. This time he sounded weary.

"I don't think you do. This entire situation calls for a certain amount of delicacy."

"Dad I—" Hiccup jerked, like he just choked on something. "—I know."

Mercifully, Stoick ignored the slipup.

"You're trying to do the impossible here—it's bad enough how you left, you can't just waltz around the village like you're a part of it."

"I know!" Hiccup snapped. He turned his face to Stoick's shoes, but he didn't look up. Stoick could see those long fingers tighten around the mug. "Look, I was up all night, I'm tired. Let's just get this damn meeting over with—"

Stoick couldn't stop himself. He grabbed Hiccup's arm tightly and the boy's head finally whipped around to face him. Hiccup appeared shocked and Stoick took satisfaction in it—he was still the father.

"Don't you dare snap at me," Stoick hissed. "This is still my village and you are still a traitor. You are here only on the condition of helping win this war—"

Hiccup's shock melted quickly. He didn't struggle, didn't try jerking his arm from Stoick's hold—perhaps knowing it would be futile against the vast strength. He settled on giving Stoick such a cutting stare that the chief felt like he just took three steps backwards in making any sort of progress with his son.

Gods, there was so much defiance in that face. The worst part was, it looked familiar.

"When is the meeting?" Hiccup asked flatly. There was something dead in his voice, in his eyes—like he had expected such behavior from the chief, yet felt disappointment for it anyway. Affected, Stoick released the arm immediately.

"After dagmál," Stoick answered. "I—" He took a breath and ran a hand through his hair. Idly, he wondered where he left his helmet. "Hiccup, I—"

Hiccup rose in a sweeping, sudden movement that had Stoick leaning back a tick. Once again, the chief stood in shock of how tall Hiccup had gotten. Not exactly filled out—not by their standards—but passing every expectation the man once had for the boy.

"I'll meet you there," Hiccup announced, and he started walking away without any further ado.

Stoick's morning hunger left him. So did any sleepiness lingering from his waking. For a moment longer he stood, numb, and watched his son walk through the village towards the forge. People turned and stared, first for his unfamiliarity, then because of recognition. No one acted against Hiccup, probably too shocked to see him stroll flagrantly among them so soon after having his status suspended—but Stoick still felt pained at what they could do to him. He didn't want to see that sort of animosity directed at his...at his...

A sour taste coated the back of his mouth as the beginnings of the whispers reached his ears. He knew village life would revert to how it had been after Hiccup's departure—that people would tip toe around him and gossip would fly. What a shite way to start off a day.

Stoick glanced down at the mug Hiccup had left, the steam rising made visible in the first rays of dawn.
Bugger it all. That was his mug.

"Howdy!"

"CRIPES!"

Gobber jerked so violently he nearly fell face first into the hearth. As it worked out, his lurch landed one of his mustache braids in the coals, and the frayed strands caught fire. The blacksmith bellowed and began slapping at the flame with his flesh hand.

"What the—What the bleedin' Hel is the matter with you?" Gobber roared. His wild eyes switched between the smoking hairs and Hiccup's grinning face in the shop window. "I coulda' cut me other arm off! Would'a like that, eh? You barmy idget! Look at my bleedin' hair! Look at it! Not got enough as it is! And what in Hel's crossing are you doing in the village, out in broad daylight? The first dullard with a half-sharpened axe can lop your thick head off. You're a bloody outlaw is what you are—who d'you think you are just walking around—"

Hiccup grinned, and vaulted through the shop window effortlessly. It was child's play after hopping on the back of a growing dragon day in and out.

"Morning, Gobber."

Gobber approached Hiccup in a far more foreboding manner than his father had; his hammer-hand gleamed and his dark, sweaty brow could match Demyan's dirtiest days. Yet Hiccup felt only comfort from crossing the threshold. It was almost like having Toothless with him—a charm to bring him familiarity, safety and luck in an otherwise terrifying environment.

Hiccup's geniality could not placate Gobber. He stopped a mere arm's length from Hiccup and shook his hammer.

"I oughtta knock that smarmy smirk off your face—"

"I thought we should go to the meeting together," Hiccup interrupted brightly. "I figured if I had a higher-up with me it'd be less likely someone would try and kill me."

"Meetin'—what?" Gobber's brow lowered as he stopped to think about what Hiccup said. Then his eyes grew large. "Oh—that...yes. That... Okay. Right. That's well enough. But its still not safe for you to just—"

"Yeah, I got it from my—from Stoick already," Hiccup cut in quickly.

He found it difficult to continue to face Gobber as he struggled through his father's name, so Hiccup took to observing his old work environment. It still smelled the same, still tasted like thick ash and sweat on his tongue. This had been his second home, his sanctuary—from the village and from his father. He would breathe these fumes in all day given the choice.

"Did he now?" And from Gobber's tone, Hiccup knew he wouldn't be scolded further. "I take it he's awake then?"

"Yeah..." Hiccup paused before a dangling set of shields. The metal lining reflected a highly
distorted likeness of his face. "What's up with that, anyway? Is he alright?"

"Och, he's fine," Gobber shrugged off. He began twisting the hammer prostatic from his forearm, eyeing Hiccup all the while. "A fair bit older than he used to be, that's all. Years have not been kind to any of us, to be fair—but I'd say he's aged the most."

Hiccup continued to watch his reflection in the hanging shields, but Gobber got the distinct impression he registered nothing in his sight. Hiccup seemed more focused on ignoring the heavy stare his former master burdened him with.

"It's good to see you," Gobber added quieter. He was pleased to see Hiccup quirk a small smile.

"You saw me yesterday," Hiccup pointed out. His feet continued to move around the forge, his hips turning around jutting anvils and workbenches as his legs remembered their placement. Nothing had changed since he left. Nothing but the height of things.

"You know what I mean, cheeky brat," Gobber returned. "It's nice to see you back in the village, that's all. Stupid. But nice. Speaking of which, have you really been walking around town?"

Hiccup sighed. "What is the big deal with that? Stoick was on my case first thing this morning. It's like he was looking for something to fight about..."

"Probably the only thing he's comfortable doing with you. He just went straight to the old fallback didn't he?" Gobber chuckled in the face of Hiccup's deadpan expression. "Ah, you know I'm only joking. Lay up on him. We saw you for the first time in years last night—that's the big deal. All we managed to do after is tell everyone you were coming in to discuss new battle strategies...there's too much that could go wrong. Tempers are high right now."

Gobber sounded exasperated in his explanation, but he kept his good humor.

Hiccup would not feel apologetic. He said as much.

"I refuse to run around, ducking behind water barrels." Not like his true first return to the village. "No one really said anything to me while I was out so...I figured it was fine."

The blond man shook his head and his uneven mustache braids swung.

"You might have actually been attacked. You know that, right?"

Hiccup made a show of looking in both direction before whispering, "I'm really fast."

Gobber rolled his eyes toward the ceiling.

"Hel slap it into yeh, you fool boy. Lost your sense out there is what happened."

Hiccup turned away again, moving passed the hearth, remembering the countless days he spent sweating over it, the laughs of sparring children floating through the window to taunt him. He hadn't been allowed to participate; he was undersized, he would have gotten hurt.

He pushed on, a slight scowl turning his features.

"Why does no one believe me when I say I can take care of myself?"

"It's not just that..." Gobber said. "Don't forget what this war's done to people. Seeing anyone on a dragon's bound to tick a number of them off. They'll be difficult just to be difficult, just to make life harder for you after what you did. Change may be less n' less likely the longer this whole thing drags
"I know," Hiccup said softly. "That's why I want to get this done now..."

He worried his lip, his eyes losing their focus. He needed to change the minds of the most stubborn people in the northern hemisphere. He needed to end a centuries-long enmity between two races. He needed to defeat a seemingly undefeatable beast.

Gobber watched as Hiccup moved closer to his old study area and felt compelled to keep speaking.

"Well, on the other hand there's a few of us seriously interest in hearing you out. I mean, it's obvious to everyone something needs to be done, we just need to get the damn fools to admit it."

Hiccup smiled again and, again, it was brief. He seemed more and more distracted as he made his way to his back corner.

"You didn't forge that bow, did you?"

Hiccup paused, feet away from the curtain acting as a gate.

"Don't even think about touching it," he said over his shoulder. He knew Gobber; he knew the man would want to pick apart every practical and impractical aspect of a weapon. Already, Hiccup could tell Gobber thought the designs to be superfluous and the color unnecessarily bright.

"Well I'm just curious—"

"Gobber, I'm serious."

"At least tell me who made it. Did you take on under another master?"

"I did...but that was unrelated."

"So how'd you get it?" Unknown to Hiccup, Gobber had a bad feeling in his gut. It seemed the sort of weapon one would have to sell their soul for. Or their future.

"It was a gift," Hiccup murmured distracted by the familiar feel of the old, hanging cloth, and Framherja's small vibrations warming his spine. She seemed to like being talked about. "One that I didn't have much choice in accepting."

"From?"

"Thor."

Hiccup pulled back the curtain as Gobber sucked in a breath. For a moment, neither moved. Nothing had been touched—no tacked papers taken down, no notes destroyed. Aside from the organized piles of old designs, it looked very much like how Hiccup had left it two years ago. Gobber hadn't allowed anyone in there but Fishlegs whenever the boy needed ideas. Not even Stoick was to touch anything, particularly in his initial rage, when he wanted to obliterate any evidence of his son and his treachery.

Hiccup hummed low in his throat and gave the small space a clean sweep with his eyes. Then he turned away from the room, allowing the curtain to fall closed. His face was more unreadable than Gobber had ever seen it.

"Alright?" Gobber asked. The boy looked a bit peaky in his opinion.
"Yeah," Hiccup said after a curt clearing of his throat. "Yeah, that's...I'm fine. We should go soon, yeah?"

"Aye," Gobber agreed.

He couldn't tell if Hiccup was upset that nothing had been done to the space, or touched, but it was obvious the boy felt affected in some way.

"Come on, then." Hiccup said. He started his way across the forge. This time he didn't take his time observing as he crossed the space, but his hands brushed by each tool and iron piece he passed, like he wanted to use every sense at his disposal to re-familiarize himself with the place.

Gobber decided that there was something sweet and childish about the way Hiccup seemed so affected being in the forge. The boy arrived all smiles before an unexpected power overtook his senses. Hiccup tried to act standoffish, like returning to his home meant nothing to him, but Gobber thought his actions to be far too demonstrative, and his features to betray far too much emotion, to get away with the charade.

"So you got a new master out there?" Gobber spoke out, casual. "I suppose it's fine s'long as you didn't lose your touch. Went under the guidance of a few different ones meself back in my day."

Gobber started to twist on his mug-hand. Hiccup narrowed his eyes.

"Gobber...really?"

"What?" Gobber said innocently. He remained steadfast in his winding. "The meeting's going to be in the Hall anyway."

Hiccup really smiled, showing off his teeth. His head shook.

"I saw what you did to that dragon."

The expression on Hiccup's face froze, the smile began to fall.

"What?" he hushed.

"The tail...you had a system of sorts. Thought it was breeching at first, but it was attached to the tail."

Gobber waited for Hiccup to elaborate. The boy had dropped his gaze to the ground, concentrating on something well beyond Gobber's comprehension.

Finally, Hiccup said. "Did...did anyone try and recreate the bola cannon? To knock out dragons?"

"No," Gobber sighed. "Too proud."

That and he doubted many could figure out how.

"Good." Hiccup's could see his response surprised Gobber, so he elaborated. "That's how I ripped his tailfin off. It's too risky—we could end up causing more harm than good. I've thought of a different way to get them out of range..."

Gobber, mug-apparatus attached, turned and began his hobble out of the wide entryway. Now it was he who shook his head at Hiccup.

"Different...Och boy, don't tell me your thinking of compromising the safety of our village for the beasts."
Disturbingly like his mother.

"You know...you're the one who taught me how a dragon couldn't fly without their tails and wings," Hiccup point out, squinting as the sun hit his eyes. "You made me realize exactly what I did to him— to Toothless."

Gobber rubbed his temples. "Aw, bollocks. Lad, please don't tell me I'm responsible for your madness in running off with—"

"No, no," Hiccup assured him. There was a touch of laughter to his voice. "That was a madness all my own."

The subject was upon them now. Light banter and comfortable conversation couldn't hide the fact that Gobber's apprentice abandoned their village for a dragon.

Gobber eyed the boy at his side, memorizing the profile, noting the similarities and differences from his memory's stores. He was his mother's son, alright.

"Care to explain what was going through that daft head of yours?" Gobber asked.

"Not sure it's possible," Hiccup answered. He didn't sound like he wanted to elaborate either.

"Hmph. Tell you what—you outta stop by for a drink tonight or summat. You can tell me about all this. I know a few of the other fellers are interested in finding out more about you—"

"Finding out about me means finding out about dragons in a way, I can guarantee you, they'll not want to know," Hiccup informed him in a flat tone.

"Give them a chance. I think you're going into this already expecting to be rejected."

"Won't I?"

"You're also underestimating how desperate we are."

Hiccup continued to stare straight ahead and Gobber continued to observe him. His apprentice was taller, armed, and had an individual brand of confidence to augment his usual snarky nature, but he was still just a boy. He looked like a boy who took on too much without realizing until it was too late.

"Do you even know what you're doing, lad?" His question came out quiet and honest. Personal. Gobber was all too aware of the stares now that they were out in the daylight.

Hiccup smiled a closed-lipped smile that never reached his eyes.

"I was born ready," he cracked in his usual droll tone, just as he always spoke to Gobber.

And, like always, Gobber saw right through it.

#

The Mead Hall felt unusually warm, even for the summer. Too many people shared the same muggy air. Nearly every resident of Berk huddled around the largest table the Hall had to offer, and the sheer number of bodies pressed together made Hiccup glad for such a wide, albeit attention-
grabbing, berth acting as an empty barrier. He sat on top of his own table, arms crossed, legs crossed—quite a sight to behold, all in all. He wanted the distance, even if it meant extra attention; he wanted everyone in his sights.

Framherja felt hot against his back, but her warmth was a welcome one. It gave him the strength needed to confront faces and faces of familiar hostility.

His damned arm hurt.

He faced his father, who stood on the opposite side of the giant, rounded table, a semi-circle of Vikings crowding around his back. And it wasn’t seeing Uncle Spitelout or Gobber or Phlegma on Stoick’s right side, it was Fish and Astrid and Snotlout at his left, looking as authoritative as any official should be. They were...

They really had grown up.

The full reality of what Berk went through—of what his peers went through—started to settle in on him. Not that he was without his own hardships, but he couldn’t go on thinking he learned more than they in his time away. No one had been left unscathed.

"Settle down! Settle down!" Stoick hollered above the din. It had the desired effect in half the time it would have taken any other man screaming at the top of his lungs to manage. The villagers continued to stare at Hiccup, so much mistrust and wariness open in their expressions.

"Righ’," Stoick commenced. "Now, to start things off, I suppose we should intr—well, re-introduce Hiccup." He raised a meaty hand towards his former son, but he barely glanced at him, as though Hiccup were nothing more than an old, family antique lacking sentimental value.

Hiccup gave a sarcastic little wave to the stony-faced crowd. It went unappreciated.

"Where's your dragon?" some disembodied voice shouted from the throng.

"He's not here today."

Hiccup shocked himself with the strength carried in his voice, but the following pride settled some of his nerves. He had worried over how he might sound to them. He wanted to speak up, never fumble with his words, because he wanted to show these people he wasn't a scared, awkward kid anymore.

He was a scared, awkward man.

"Why?"

This time, Hiccup saw who asked. Liceberg—or something to that effect—the father of Speedifist.

"Because I don't trust you," Hiccup answered. His eyes started on Liceberg, but swept across the crowd before he landed on his father. Stoick looked as though he were seeing right through him. Hiccup felt like they had already fallen into an old routine.

Then the noise met his ears. Outbursts of whispers pattered around, more frowns directed at him. At his father's side, he saw Astrid slap a hand to her head.

Maybe she just had a hangover?

"Quiet!" Gobber snapped. He too frowned at Hiccup, not reprovingly. Simply weary. They all looked weary. His father especially. "We all agreed what's best for this village beforehand, so shut
"Not all o' us..." Someone muttered nastily, and Hiccup saw an unfortunate number of heads move in agreement.

His own tiredness struck him then; he was fighting an uphill battle from here on out. He didn't have Toothless with him and he felt just a little too overwhelmed for tact.

"Whether you agree or not, this village is going to be destroyed if you don't listen to me," he informed the naysayers tartly.

"Why should we listen to you?" another voice sneered.

"Because you're out of options."

From another direction Hiccup heard: "You say we're out of options—"

"Listen to him!" Fishlegs announced, his voice loud and deep. Hiccup's eyes snapped to the large boy and he realized that Astrid was right—Fishlegs had changed. He just spoke out against the village. "We're out of options and we've only ever seen progress at Hiccup's doing. The chief met with him, they saw him riding a dragon. Everything Hiccup's told us so far has been true whether you want to admit it or not. So let's get his diagnosis on this war and figure it out from there!"

Hiccup felt like he had accidentally stepped into the wrong village. The entire Hall had settled down at Fishlegs' words.

"Thanks Fish." He offered the blond a nod of appreciation. Fishlegs managed to return it, taking a moment to recover from the shock of receiving thanks in the first place. Or maybe it was simply having Hiccup address him.

Hiccup had the floor again. He released a deep breath, leaning one elbow on his knee as he drank in the sight of everyone he could fit in his vision.

"Listen up! I didn't bring Toothless—you'll find out why he's named that later!—I didn't bring him because it's too soon and I'm not going to risk his safety at the hands of you—" Hiccup caught himself from saying 'jumpy idiots' just in time. He probably should not have visited Gobber beforehand, because now he had a glut of harmless insults to throw at people without the restraint to hold his tongue. "Anyway...what you need to know is that the dragons are not acting of their own free will. The thing that controls them is referred to as a demon, alright? A demon that can control their minds. The demon uses them to hunt for it, and when they don't bring enough food they're eaten themselves."

No one started whispering this time. Hiccup didn't know if he'd written this to his father in a previous letter or if they truly had no idea, but something he said managed to disturb an entire Mead Hall full of people.
"However...it cannot control human minds."

"What—" Hiccup's eyes snapped to his father's, and for the first time since that morning he felt like they made eye contact. "What are our chances of attacking this...thing directly?"

"Bad," Hiccup responded without any thought to it. "Aside from the fact that it's a demon, it has hundreds and hundreds of dragons at its disposal so long as they're in a range of control. You've only had to fight a portion of them because the rest are sent to neighboring villages. If you're in the nest? It's too overwhelming."

"There's been an increase in those attacking us, and an increase in th' number o' settlements suffering," Gobber mentioned. Hiccup nodded.

"I'm not surprised. The demon's power is growing. She's fed more, she grows stronger, she extends her range of control, she manages to capture more dragons...she's fed more. Do you see the cycle? It's only going to get worse, and it's going to get worse faster and faster until there will be absolutely no stopping her. This isn't going to resolve itself on its own. What you're seeing here is the beginning of the end."

His wording may have come off as a little dramatic, but Hiccup could see he was reaching them—he could feel it. Less people scowled, more had blank looks of puzzlement and contemplation. It was a hard shell to crack, but Hiccup knew some people heard him—actually heard him—which was more than he hoped for walking into the Hall.

"There's another thing," he said, addressing his father's question once more. "There's a poison surrounding the nest—it looks like a fog—" So many heads started nodding that Hiccup knew no further description was necessary. "I don't know what your encounters with it have been in the past, but I think it becomes more potent the deeper you move into it. It might have grown stronger along with the demon over the years—"

"What you know about this demon?" Another question broke out above the soft hum of murmurs.

"I only saw its head." Hiccup tried to think of a way to describe the absolute magnitude of what he experienced—or maybe the pause in thought was enough for them because a growing amount of concerned faces popped up in the crowd. "I—it's...it's like nothing you've ever seen before, I can tell you that. It can swallow plenty of dragons whole...but...from what I've seen? I would estimate its body to be about the size of this village."

A new wave of whispers broke out, but instead of denial and anger, Hiccup could only read distinct alarm.

"What do we do—?"

"There's no way—none—how could—?"

"—leave. Best thing we—"

"Quiet!" Stoick bellowed. He didn't look panicked by half-picked up whispers of leaving and despair. If anything, he appeared strengthened. Stoick turned back to Hiccup, his face grave. "Have you any solutions in mind?"

Hiccup nodded, and prepared himself for sure rejection.
"First, we'd have to whittle down its army by taking dragon after dragon out of range. Here—"
Hiccup unrolled the map of the barbaric archipelagos he had resting across his lap until then. He held it flat at his stomach, revealing the charcoaled parameter of the demon's jurisdiction he'd spent the night mapping. "I marked the area of control. We were on the edge of it—" He tapped a dotted line running through the Isle of Berk. "But now it's out here," he tapped a point in the ocean, "...so waiting for them to come to us isn't prudent. They're too far in to simply knock out."

Tiredness struck at him again out of nowhere. Maybe it was because he hadn't drunk enough water, but the absolute stuffiness of the building suddenly came to his attention. The air he breathed tasted stale, overused, and his vest too heavy. He didn't want to be here.

A cool spot under Toothless' wing for a nap sounded more inviting than he'd like to admit.

Focus!

He shook his head. "What...what we need to do is fly to these farthest perimeters—"

"Wait...did he say fly?"

"...fly...?"

"I can draw out dragons, and have those trained waiting just on the outside."

"He can't be serious..."

"Trained? Is he mad?"

"We can start knocking them out, leading them to safe zones, where they can recover and hopefully have people willing to bond with—"

"We can't trust 'em once we knock 'em out—"

"—turn on us for sure—"

"Get over it!" Hiccup snapped. He had to clamp down on the urge to stand up just to emphasize how strongly he felt about this. "They're nothing like you think they are—they aren't so much different from Vikings! You can make a better team together than apart if you just try—"

More people started muttering and Hiccup itched to take his bow and shoot a bolt into the center of the table. Thor be dammed who got a splinter in their eye from the explosion.

He could do it too. The more people interrupted him, the more he felt that power boil within. It was a slow but strong build. He felt like he could blow out an entire wall with the frustration this village fed him.

"It's true."

The muttering ceased. A profound silence of incredulity settled in so thickly that the heads turning to face Astrid Hofferson seemed to move in slow motion.

"Astrid?" Snotlout questioned her name, and because no one else spoke—no one else seemed to breathe—Hiccup could hear the hurt in it.

Astrid didn't look at Snotlout. Her eyes darted around; perhaps she didn't realize it was her own voice that made the announcement.
At first, Hiccup thought she would clam up. She was about to speak out for what was right. She was about to speak out against her village. The two things she stood most strongly for were at odds for the first time in her life, and Astrid had to make a choice.

"The dragons..." she wet her lips, and all hesitancy was wiped away with that flick of her tongue. Hiccup saw her spine elongate, saw her shoulders drop and her chin tilt up. He realized, amusedly, that she just adopted the same posture she had in their final dragon-training class—that moment when she stood before the Elder, so sure she would be the Chosen One.

"The dragons are not what we think they are," she said clearly. "They're...they're slaves. They don't want to attack us, and we don't want them to attack us—not like how things have been going. So that means we have to put everything into making this work. We have to listen to Hiccup—"

"What are you saying?" Someone asked sharply among the sea of shifting bodies. Having Hiccup—who had always been strange and inappropriate—say such nonsense was one thing. To have Astrid Hofferson on the other hand...

Who would dispute one of their most prolific activists of the war?

Astrid appeared lost for another instant before covering it up. She faced her father, who had asked the question.

"I met some...some dragons. I—I accidentally ran into Hiccup the night before..." Hiccup saw Fishlegs lower his face into his hands, and, feeling almost detached watching this play out, his amusement reached an all time high. "I met Toothless."

The word Toothless passed between lips as villagers mumbled among themselves about the meaning behind this particular word.

"My Night Fury," Hiccup supplied, and the mass confusion directly turned to unease.

"We can fly on them," Astrid rushed louder. She leaned forward, away from the chief and his counsel, over the table with such intensity in her voice and her face that even Hiccup felt compelled to believe whatever she said. "Attack from them. Outside of this war, it's an advantage no one would ever suspect. And when we free them, we can have their loyalty. Think about this—"

What? Hiccup reeled.

Heads were turning, faces obviously contemplating, and he hated it. This was not how he wanted to get their cooperation.

"That's not why we would help them!" He said this staring directly at Astrid. Her face stayed strong but, had he wanted to see it, Hiccup would have found the apology in her gaze. He turned back to his audience, making sure to address the council as well.

"We don't want to help them," Hoark announced to several's belated agreement.

"Then do it to help yourselves!" Hiccup retorted angrily. "But don't do it with the intent of taking advantage of them. It's time to stop trying to hurt each other for what's happened in the past and start thinking about the future. You—and your children—are all going to die if you don't start listening to me!"

He had their attention, but he knew Astrid's words still rang in their mind. He threw her a contemptuous look, though it went unnoticed; her concentration seemed focused on her own father, and her position now quite subdued.
Hiccup forced himself to keep talking. "You need to bond with them first—this is a process that there are advantages to. It will give us access to the demon and better protection against its defenses. It will be the start of surviving, and when you really learn about them...then maybe we can find a way to defeat the demon itself."

A voice emerged. "You can't defeat it now?"

*Where you not listening to me?* Hiccup wanted to ask. Instead he said, flatly, "No. I can't."

"Not alone," Astrid added. Hiccup felt torn between gratitude and chagrin with her right now.

However, Hiccup did see nods. Just a couple; the first area his eyes were drawn recognized the Thorston twins—both still with long blond hair and hard features. They looked positively excited. A man stood next to Ruffnut—the one courting her, Hiccup had to assume. The man wasn't nodding; he was looking at his bride-to-be as though she were volunteering to be put in the stocks.

"Yes," Hiccup reluctantly agreed. "Hopefully not alone. Because every dragon will attack me before I can get to the demon, whether I know what to do with it or not. That's why we need to take out its army a bit, give the dragons themselves a better defense against her. I thoroughly believe that, united, this demon can be defeated. I also believe it is our only saving grace."

No one had any proof to say otherwise. Not with Stoick's allowances. Not with Astrid's support.

"Did they attack you last time?"

Stoick's question came out so softly, just barely catching Hiccup's attention, that Hiccup rather thought he meant it for a more private conversation.

Hiccup shrugged, and gave his father the first smile in years—dry, but still a smile. "Perk of riding a Night Fury. No one can catch us."

His father didn't smile back. He looked more troubled than before.

Gobber smiled, however. Some people even laughed, and it heartened Hiccup. It was faint, and maybe it was sheer exhaustion messing with his senses, but he could feel some sort of rapport with just a fraction of the village. It was a start.

"I'll bring Toothless by tomorrow, we're staying near the forest. He is not to be harmed, and no one will be hurt in return," he announced briskly. "I'll take a couple volunteers to the island. You can get there by boat, where the dragons I've freed so far are residing. It's just to introduce you—and only volunteers," Hiccup assured when he saw some of the frowns returning. He didn't want to lose that minute understanding just yet. "Those dragons are free to move about as they please, they can leave whenever they want but they've chosen to stay by me. They are outside of the control, but they are still dragons. If you do anything stupid, I will help them kill you."

And there went that rapport.

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Hiccup slipped from the Mead Hall amazingly well for someone with a glowing bow at his back and a status of an outlaw hanging over him like a personal raincloud.
His father immediately began to conference with those closest to him and Hiccup could not ignore the opportunity to break away for a time. He knew he had to speak with his father again—there was so much planning to be done (and so much arguing, on his part)—but the movement of the crowd when the meeting released suddenly had Hiccup feeling smothered. He couldn't pick out individual actions anymore—there were too many, it got too loud, he felt too trapped.

He really just needed to see Toothless for a moment...then he would return when his father was a bit more isolated. It would be safer—

"Hiccup!"

"Ah—" He spun, having just made it outside the Mead Hall doors, and immediately stepped to the side to allow people to pass. It took him a moment to figure out who called to him—everyone who shuffled by stared at him but only one person seemed willing to make such bold eye contact.

She came at him so fast that Hiccup feared she might hug him. He took an acute step backwards, and made sure to give off enough signals to stop her from doing so. While being hugged by Ruffnut Thorston would be weird at best, accidentally zapping her in a village that didn't trust him wouldn't be good either.

Thankfully she stopped just beyond his personal boundaries, her wide smile looking largely out of place among the many black looks bobbing by.

Hiccup leaned back, positively bewildered.

"Hey...Ruff."

"Dude!"

"...And Tuff."

"Dude—" Tuffnut said again, stealing around his sister. He raised a hand and, for a moment, it looked like as though he were about to clap Hiccup on the shoulder. He quickly thought the better of it. "That was—"

"Okay," Ruffnut cut over him, "can I just be the first to say—"

"—Wow!" Both Thorston twins finished at the same time.

"I hate it when you guys do that."

Hiccup's head jerked away from the two eager faces to a new, and rather drained, voice. Fishlegs towered over the pair—and considering how tall Tuffnut was, that said a lot. Beneath his helmet, much of Fishlegs' hair had been pulled back into a short braid, and he sported a beard Hiccup had to envy.

So long as he was bound to Toothless, he'd probably never feel the weight of a full one on his jaw.

Tuffnut reached up and slapped the broad-shouldered man on the back.

"Nice job Fish."

Fishlegs gave his fellow blond a weak smile.

"I'll never get used to it, I swear, I never will." There was a relief to his voice that told Hiccup the passive Fishlegs of old was still in there.
"Thank you," Hiccup said. "For backing me up in there."

Fishlegs' smile strengthened quite a bit. "Well it's all true—everything you've told us since you first left has checked out."

Hiccup grinned back. "I can't believe you were up there, right with the counsel. What are you? The village tactician?"

Fishlegs shrugged in modesty.

"Anything that requires charting, calculation or analysis, I suppose. Actually, I really have you to thank," he admitted, and he rubbed the back of his neck in a habit Hiccup could barely dredge up from memories of their childhood together.

"Me?"

Fishlegs nodded. "Yeah. I mean, you really helped the village...and you found a way to do it that was so you. I figured...if you could do it, so could I. That and..." Fishlegs glanced at the twins, contemplating if he should keep talking. He did, but his voice lowered a touch. "That and I wanted to help you. Give you some credibility here. A way back into the village, or something. I—I guess I wanted to make up for, you know, being a—a bad friend."

For a moment, Hiccup could only stare at the large man, as though trying to make sense of an explanation-turned-apology.

"Fish, uh..."

Fishlegs went back to rubbing the back of his neck, feeling much too exposed under such scrutiny.

"Look, Hiccup, for what it's worth—I'm sorry."

Hiccup started to shake his head; he could feel the power of a suppressed laugh lighten his chest.

"Fish, it's alright. You've done enough with getting them to start listening to me—"

"I'm sorry too," Ruffnut spoke out, bewildering both men with her sudden admission.

Hiccup struggled with his voice for a moment.

"Um—"

"Sorry I didn't realize how awesome you are!" She finished, doing a little fist pump.

"I don't—"

"Man—you didn't pull any punches!" Tuffnut crowed loudly. A couple of passersby gave them more dark looks. Hiccup felt like he was somehow tainting the others simply by speaking to them.

Ruffnut started to reminisce. "When you told Liceberg you didn't trust him—"

"That was actually meant for everybody—"

"When you told everyone to shut up." Tuffnut added. "At a Thing! Who does that?"

"And you know I'm on the volunteer list right?" Ruffnut asked. "Because I'm totally going to ride a dragon. It's going to happen."
"Oh!" Tuffnut looked like he just recalled the entire purpose of the meeting. "Me too, me too."

Hiccup looked to Fishlegs, wordlessly asking how to turn them off.

"If you couldn't tell, they're really excited about you shaking things up," Fishlegs explained, slightly apologetic. "And the manner in which you're going about it is probably approved only by them. Is it true you were wandering, unescorted, around the island today?"

Hiccup sighed for the umpteenth time.

"What is with that?"

"Hey, guys!"

Astrid emerged from the crowd next, elbowing a couple people out of her way in typical, Viking fashion. Hiccup frowned at her.

"I know what you're going to say," she began just as he opened his mouth. "But I figured it would at least help people listen to you."

Hiccup closed his mouth. Then he closed his eyes.

"I understand, and appreciate what you were trying to do," he said slowly. "But I don't think starting any relationship between two formerly warring races under false pretenses—"

"Hypocrite," she immediately inserted. Her lips had pursed.

"I don't want them trying to take advantage of the dragons," Hiccup restated.

"There you go, thinking only of the dragons—"

"Guys!" Fishlegs interrupted. It worked in silencing the twins as well, who were half listening, half countering each other's delusions of dragon riding. "Come on, how did you ever get anywhere yesterday?"

"Yeah, Astrid, I can't believe you lied to us and went after Hiccup," Ruffnut said, appearing rather displeased as the fact weighed in on her.

"It wasn't pretty." Hiccup groaned under his breath to Fishlegs. He rubbed the bridge of his nose. He didn't think he'd be able to get much done tonight dragon-wise. His head pounded already.

Astrid observed his behavior, and took note of the sallow quality to his cheeks and eyes she hadn't noticed the night before.

"Did you sleep at all?" she asked, remembering how he mentioned spending the night charting the entire perimeter of the dragon. It had already been late when they parted...

"No," he responded shortly. "Did you?"

She snorted. "Yes. Sleeping is all I'm allowed to do. My father's furious with me for coming in late."

"Why were you late?" Snotlout asked. He strode up to their group, one of the last to leave the Mead Hall. He stopped by Tuffnut's side, he looked at Astrid, and he didn't acknowledge Hiccup's presence.

"Yeah," Tuffnut piped up. "Why were you late?"
His eyebrows waggled up and down until Astrid knocked him in the shoulder.

"He was convincing me not to kill him," she answered. "It took all night."

She looked at Hiccup, who nodded, bearing a straight face.

"All night," he confirmed.

They grinned at his admission, and it dawned on Hiccup that everyone he wanted to impress and hang out with as a boy now spoke to him in welcoming tones. Everyone but Snotlout, that is.

"So you met one—you really met a Night Fury?" Fishlegs directed at Astrid, unable to keep the envy from his voice.

"It was the Timberjack that was interested in her," Hiccup tossed out as an offhand comment.

"Timberjack!" Fishlegs looked about ready to start dancing on the spot. "How many do you have on that island?"

"Just me, Toothless, the Jack and a Nightmare. I was hoping to see if I could get a couple more tonight, but I'm not sure it's going to happen..."

The twins exchanged bewildered looks. Fishlegs rocked back on his heels. Snotlout eyed him with a mixture of curiosity and reserve.

"And you just...what? Hang out with them?" Ruffnut pressed.

Hiccup felt like he missed out on something big with how his casual reference to dragon life was received. He knew spending any time with dragons outside of killing them was typically objected to in these parts, but he couldn't quite comprehend what justified the—in his opinion—exaggerated reactions.

"I visit them, sleep there." He shrugged. "They're both very friendly, and very grateful for me freeing them—the Jack and Nightmare, I mean. Toothless is just needy." Toothless. Hiccup felt something twist in his stomach and the unreal need to make sure Toothless was okay overcame him. What if someone didn't go to the meeting, went to the cove instead and...and got eaten by a Night Fury? How would they spin that? "Look, that's not what's important here. The dragons want to help free the others, but as soon as they cross over into the Demon's range, they'll be lost. However, if they bond with a human they'll be able to fight—"

"Why humans?" Fishlegs cut in.

"Ah-mph," Hiccup blew some of his hair out of his eyes. "Well, there's...there's something about our minds that protect us...I can't really explain it..."

"Our minds?" Snotlout snorted, lamely. "Are you saying we need to battle this thing with maths and..."

"No," Hiccup said shortly, too tired to get into it with his cousin's boorishness. The only one he could possibly use as a logic translator was... He turned to Fishlegs. "Fish, what are a human's greatest physical defenses?"

The large man immediately went into his standard recollection pose. "Well, upper body strength can be pretty good, though leg tone can mean—"
"No, no, I mean against a dragon. Or even a bear. How do we compare?"

Fishlegs immediately made light of the correlation. "We can't actually. Comparatively, our bodies are rather weak—our skin is thin, we tend to rely on outside sources for heat, like clothes," he listed for the benefit of the twins. "Our nails are weak, bodies smaller—"

"Exactly." Hiccup cut him off, because, if memory served him right, Fishlegs could and would go on forever with facts. "So how is it that we've survived so well?"

"Weapons..." Fishlegs struggled to figure out what Hiccup so obviously wanted him too. The outcast continued to stare at him. "Which...we come up with, with our minds!"

"Exactly," Hiccup smiled widely. "Humans are smart and it's what sets us apart from every other creature. We can create! Our intelligence has kept us alive against all odds. From what I've experienced, there's something about the human mind that's powerful enough to keep her out of it. And by bonding with a dragon we extend that—"

"Woah, woah!" Tuffnut broke in, hands splayed out in front of him. "This demon is a girl?"

Hiccup blinked, trying to think if he accidentally alluded to such a thing. Or why it was important.

"Uh, I don't know. But they refer to it as a female from time to time so I guess that's its assumed gender."

"What?" Tuffnut chimed in again. "How can they "refer" to anything when they can't—?"

"Shut up, dunderhead." Ruffnut cuffed her brother over the head.

"He just understands them, okay?" Astrid broke in waspishly. She turned back to Hiccup and nodded for him to continue. Hiccup hadn't realized how closely she'd been paying attention until she started to speak again. He felt her unwavering focus as a slight distraction at his side.

"Right. So, back to my original point—if they have a human rider, one they've spent time with and trust..."

"They can return to her control but keep their minds," Fishlegs finished. "Have you proven this?"

"He said he went to the nest," Astrid responded instead. She looked to Hiccup for confirmation. "Right? With Toothless?"

"Yeah," he said, though didn't want to get into that subject yet. "It works, and it should work for others too. They protect you from the dragons; we protect them from the demon. It's the only way to get close. I just need people to stick to the outer stuff—knock dragons out of control, get creative. I can go in and lure them to the edge—"

"Why do you get to?" Snotlout asked. He couldn't picture himself on a dragon, not ever, but he was still to be chief one day. Why should Hiccup get to play the hero?

"Because I'm the only one who knows what he's doing," Hiccup responded blandly. He hardly spared Snotlout a glance.

"I'm in!" Ruffnut hollered loudly, shooting her hand in the air. Tuffnut pushed her to the side.

"Sign me up!"

"Absolutely," Fishlegs grinned. "How do we choose?"
"You don't choose," Hiccup said, heartened by their enthusiasm. "You may build a rapport with one and from there it just kind of happens."

Snotlout took a step back, just barely keeping his face disapproving to cover up a wavering scowl. "I think I'm going to sit this one out."

Hiccup gave him a small smile anyway, trying to keep things neutral between them for as long as he could.

"That's fine," He assured Snotlout. Honestly, Hiccup was surprised 'Lout hadn't punched him in the face yet with the obvious animosity he felt from his cousin. He turned back to the others, "Well...you four are more than I could have hoped for. Astrid, we'll have to start with you since the Timberjack obviously likes you. I'll take you guys to the island tomorrow. Maybe the Nightmare will take a liking to one of you."

"Others will want to join," Astrid assured him.

Hiccup raised both eyebrows. "You think?"

"You kind of came off as a pretentious bastard for a while," Tuffnut shrugged. "So...probably more than you'd expect."

"Yeah man, you were mean," Ruffnut added. She was grinning at him like she expected to be thanked for such a generous compliment.

Hiccup blinked. Had he been mean? He sort of pretended he was just dealing with Halvdan and the Væringerjar. To get anywhere with those guys he had to be frank, harsh with truths, and assertive...

Perhaps he had been a little mean. Toothless would have been proud—

"You definitely left that meeting with a much higher approval rating than when you started," Fishlegs quipped. "Plus five, for sure."

Hiccup squinted. "What...?"

Everyone stared at him like blemish on their village—out of place and unwanted. After he lost his temper a couple times during the meeting, Hiccup had avoided making eye contact with too many people.

Look again, a voice told him. He allowed his gaze to rove over the housed slopes of Berk. Plenty of people milled around the fields and roads, and nearly all of them continuously glanced in his direction. Perhaps waiting to see what he'd do next. If he'd attack someone, if he'd leave.

Hiccup still saw those mistrustful looks in the lines of their mouths and press of their brows, but something had certainly changed. Not a single person looked at him with disappointment, and that was an expression he'd recognize anywhere. So much intrigue, so much reservation.

By Thor, people were taking him seriously.

Him. The scared, awkward man.

"Astrid!"

Hiccup identified Aksel Hofferson as one of the aggravating question callers during the meeting. The man did not look happy—not at anyone in their group.
"I gotta go," Astrid grimaced. Hiccup felt a little bad for her, having known exactly what it felt like to deal with an angry father.

"I take it you're in trouble?" He questioned lowly when she lingered by him for a moment longer.

"More than I was last night, for sure," she responded. But she smiled; she sounded genuinely happy.

"Thank you," Hiccup looked her in the eyes, all too conscious of Snotlout's heated stare. "For, you know—"

"I know," she grinned.

Fishlegs, too, looked at him oddly, but Hiccup couldn't read anything off of the look given to him.

"Astrid!" Aksel barked again.

Hiccup realized the Mead Hall must have emptied by now. He saw his dad standing just outside the door, speaking in undertones with Spitelout. He knew Stoick would want to speak with him soon, but Hiccup suddenly felt like he needed Toothless. He had been exposed to too much...Berk. He'd been alone for too long. Not even the support of his peers could quell his deep need for companionship.

"Hey!" Astrid called from halfway down the stairs. It caught more than just Hiccup's attention. "Can I see...that dragon, later, maybe?"

Unprepared, Hiccup was only spurred into answering when he felt his face slacken.

"Ah...ayuh-yeah. Yeah, sure. I'll...I'll be there tonight—before náttmál—if that's okay?"

"Astrid!" Aksel sounded more impatient than before.

Astrid jumped and ran down the rest of the steps. Hiccup took the waving hand over her shoulder as a 'yes'.

Tuffnut whistled, "Man, what happened with you two—?"

"Nothing..."

"She hated you—"

"Tuff!" Ruffnut hissed, and she punched him in the side.

Hiccup exhaled shortly and he turned to the rest of the group.

"Look...tomorrow I'm going to take you guys to the island if you're still up to it. I'll meet with my dad in the morning and then after your chores or whatever you do, just meet me by the west bridge."

"Why can't we do it now?" Ruffnut pouted.

Hiccup's eyes darted over Snotlout's shoulder, and just happened to make eye contact with Stoick. His stomach felt heavy; something told him he wouldn't get to see Toothless for a while longer.

"Because I think I have to talk with the chief..."

"Yeah," Fishlegs confirmed. "At sun's peak he wants to conference about those maps you showed us. I'd like to see them as well, actually—"
"Sun's peak?" Hiccup murmured, glancing at the sun. "That gives me a little while..."

He might just get to check in with Toothless after all.

"Then why can't we do it after you meet with the chief," Ruffnut continued to push.

Hiccup wasn't about to start explaining his sleeping schedule. Not to mentions he was to see Astrid before náttmál, and Gobber late into the night. Who knows what he'd accomplish afterwards.

"It has to be tomorrow," Tuffnut informed his sister. He took on a sultry tone. "...Because tonight he'll be busy with—"

This time it was Fishlegs who struck Tuffnut in the head.

Hiccup continued to test the borders of the village's tolerance of him. He was back on the wall, back in the pre-dawn hours. Those early risers stared at him again, this time knowing who he was. Perhaps knowing made them even more conscious of him.

It was weird...some people obviously wanted nothing more than to club him in the head and continue fighting this war as their forefather's fought, even if it meant certain death.

And others surprised him, just as Gobber said they would.

He spent the latest hours in Berk last night sharing a couple of drinks in the Mead Hall with some of the older fellows—Gobber, Ack, Stikibuns...his uncle even made an appearance near the end. It hadn't been anything serious either—mostly him telling some of his more ridiculous tales—Arnulf of Flanders, the dryad, the pirates...

They had been impressed, if not skeptical. Some had even been spurred into sharing tales of their own, youthful exploits. They drank and reminisced. For a while, Hiccup felt like he was back in Miklagard, back at that Væringjar-favored tavern.

Unbeknownst to the Vikings, Toothless had been lurking on the roof. Just in case.

It had been fun, in the end, and Hiccup did not regret going. Gobber insisted they do it again tonight, and this time he would bring a few more Vikings who were on the fence about him. Hiccup assented, knowing it gave him the favor with the older crowd he sorely lacked. He even agreed to bring some of the drinks he'd acquired on his travels.

The chief hadn't been around. According to Spitelout, Stoick had been settling down for the night earlier and earlier.

Hiccup glanced behind him to the silent home. The wait this morning felt even longer this time around. Perhaps it was because he didn't have tea to keep him occupied.

He exhaled, his heels childishly bouncing against the stone hedge. He got more looks from the early crowd.

Astrid had done wonderfully the night before. She still had moments where she clung to him in flight, but overall her behavior had relaxed greatly in the art of flying. The Timberjack had wiggled
his rear-end when he saw her and bounded over almost as soon as she had gotten off Toothless. It took Toothless yelling at the Jack to keep him from bowling her over. It took a little while longer to convince Astrid the dragon hadn't been trying to attack her. While she hadn't gotten on the Timberjack, the young woman seemed to enjoy simply spending time with the sharp creature.

Hiccup grinned in memory—watching Astrid loosen up over the evening had been a treat. They hadn't drunk anything, which made the experience a bit more awkward that time around, but there had been a certain progress in their alliance. Their conversation was slow but easygoing; they bounced around from subject to subject as Astrid learned the best spots to scratch the Jack or how to tease the young dragon with reflection spots using the falling sun.

Hiccup barely got her home in time for náttmál.

Unfortunately, Astrid wouldn't be joining them today when he showed Fishlegs and the twins how to sail to the Safe Island, as he called it; Astrid warned him that she was on thin ice with her father and she'd have to find a way to placate his feelings about her in close quarters with dragons.

Hiccup understood this; he learned of her mother's death, something they could both talk to each other about once the subject came up—and Hiccup knew Aksel to be a fair and sensible man, one that probably clung to the last of his family. He tried to appear patient when he nodded at Astrid's admission, but he desperately needed help knocking dragons out. If he were lucky, Astrid would start flying soon and the Nightmare would choose one of the Vikings he brought to the island.

If he were extra lucky, he'd find more and more volunteers to ride the dragons they knocked out—provided they could bond with dragons enough to counteract the demon's control.

But before any of this could take place today, Hiccup had another meeting—the word started to carry a negative connotation—and this time with the council only. They'd try some real strategies, where he and Fishlegs would be expected to cooperate with the expertise of their veterans and come up with some suitable battle plans.

Hiccup already had a list of small details to smooth out in his head—saddle designs for different breeds to different human bodies, cooperation of other villages...

He needed to find a way to deal with the poison, especially if he were to even think of bringing more people in there...

A presence materialized at Hiccup's side—so much smaller than his father's, yet somehow just as powerful.

Hiccup jerked at the movement, at the shadow, and quickly twisted to face the village Gothi, draped in all her furs, carrying her imposing staff.

"Ah—" Her sudden appearance left him bewildered, and wondering how she got there without him realizing.

She didn't greet him at first. She silently settled herself down on the stone hedge by his side, close enough to indicate they were more than the acquaintances he recalled them as.

Then she turned her head to face him.

Something crushed inside his chest—some twisted mixture of familiarity and remembrance and surrealism—because he knew her. He knew her in another life.

He knew those clear, grey eyes that time and mortality could never change.
"Gudrid," he spoke quietly. It was funny—the name passed his lips before the connection fully transpired within his mind. As soon as the word registered in his ears he felt the shock of it all strike him.

The Elder smiled. A face he knew, covered in wrinkles and memories.

"Hello, Hiccup."

_That was her voice!_ He knew it for certain—he recognized it underneath the waver of age and time; he knew it finally reached his ears from outside his mind. Hiccup's heart wrenched in two different directions, because as excited as he felt about actually meeting her in reality, this was...she was...

She continued to smile at his speechless reaction, caught somewhere between rue and mirth.

"I waited for you," she said.

"You..." He didn't know what to say, how to act. What would be appropriate? He felt no disgust or confliction about her age—they knew each other while she was in her youth, he only kissed her when she was smooth and young.

He simply...missed out on everything in between. It broke his heart.

"You waited for me?" he asked softly. He wanted to touch her hand like he used to but he was afraid. He was afraid of making this a reality because he couldn't quite accept this. Not yet. He'd wondered too much about meeting her in real life, he knew they must have lived in different times, but he never—not with all his imagination—thought they'd overlap like _this._

It was almost cruel.

"I never really knew if you were real, you know," she said lightly. "So I waited."

"You waited here," he whispered, looking around at the village. She had been in Berk this whole time. They lived in Berk at the same time; they just couldn't recognize each other.

Wait...

"We were here together," he said, out loud, and he felt the first spark of anger in that moment. "You knew...you knew who I was...you..."

She could have warned him. She could have prevented him from... from taking Toothless' flight. From being captured in Miklagard.

"You _chose_ me," he whispered. She chose him over Astrid, that day. The choice that spurred him into deciding to leave...

It all came back to _her._

She nodded. "Everything had a purpose, Hiccup. I acted on what I knew to be destined."

Hiccup had to close his eyes. Gods, the way she said his name, the way she looked at him, the way she could somehow follow his thought pattern, know exactly what to say to him...

"Are you...are you still my vördr?" He strangled that last word.

"Oh yes." Her smile was audible in her voice. He looked at her again, at the way she folded her hands in her lap like she used to. Or, always had. A habit that followed her through her life. "Our
souls are bound. Even in death, I will follow you. Guide you."

Hiccup winced, and looked away. "Don't say that."

"I think I've only lived as long as I have because I had to know," she said. "I suppose... I suppose I just wanted to see you, one last time."

"But you did see me," he reminded her. He still felt spiteful about it—about her tricking him. It couldn't overrule his fondness for her, his muted exhilaration of seeing her.

Gudrid shook her head. She still had the same cheekbones, still wore her hair the same—now silver instead of brown. The longer he stared at her, the more he saw her.

"No," She tapped his knee with her cane. "I wanted to see this man. You never existed before you left, Hiccup."

Hiccup looked down at himself. Then back at her.

"I didn't think it was possible, but you have gotten more confusing with age."

She chuckled.

"It's called sagacity," she countered.

"Not just a woman thing?" he said, teasing.

Her smile softened, and so did her features. She regarded him quietly for a moment, her head cocked to the side, her eyes warming enough to bring out the blue in them. Hiccup remembered the countless times she'd looked at him like that before, and he felt his face heat despite himself.

"The man you are today did not exist in Berk before," she clarified. "I could not be sure if you would return, if you would follow the choices I foresaw even with my role played. Everything that happened to you shaped who you are. There is no comparison."

Hiccup bit his lip, still a little red in the face, and tried to think of what to say to that, knowing it was meant as a compliment. Before he could, Gudrid placed a hand to her cheek, appearing as a shy girl.

"And yet...I never wanted you to see me like this."

A laughed escaped his lips. "You're still beautiful."

She made a rather pinched face. "And you're still full of it."

He coughed out another laugh—that attitude was something she must have picked up long after he knew her.

"Amma!"

Hiccup turned away from Gudrid to see a little girl sprinting towards them.

"Ah, best get this old body up," Gudrid sighed at the task. Hiccup jumped to his feet, taking her by the arm and gently guiding her to her feet. She felt so frail in his arms. He swore she was shorter than he remembered. Thinner.

"Well it seems your manners have improved since I last saw you," she said, glancing up at him through heavy eyelids. He could still sense that hint of shame in the tweak of those crow's feet.
Hiccup felt compelled to ask when, exactly, she last saw him, but the girl had reached them by that point.

"There you are!" the child puffed. Her thick, wild braids rolled over her shoulders as she came to a hasty stop. "Amma, mother's..."

She trailed, her eyes widening when they fell on Hiccup. The boisterous little girl suddenly grew very shy when his eyes turned to her.

Gudrid lifted a hand, inviting the girl to run into her side so she could watch Hiccup while in the safety of her Amma's arms.

"I don't suppose you remember my granddaughter, Thyra?" Gudrid asked.

Hardly. Hiccup spent too much time yearning about joining the other kids his age or working in the forge.

"A little," he smiled at the girl, and she tucked herself further into Gudrid's furs. "Hi Thyra. I'm—"

"Hiccup! I know who you are," Thyra piped up unexpectedly.

Gudrid rubbed Thyra's back reassuringly. A part of Hiccup still had trouble accepting that the Elder was Gudrid. Her mannerisms were so...grandmotherly, and yet...

"My Granddaughter's had dreams of you as well," Gudrid informed him.

"Ammaaa," Thyra hissed. She seemed to melt into Gudrid's side even more until only her eye and one, hanging braid were visible.

Gudrid chortled and patted the slender back. "Nothing to be ashamed of child."

"Wait..." Hiccup held up a hand. This was too much for him. "So you've both been following my...my life?"

"I have not dreamed of you in years," Gudrid said sadly. "My granddaughter is to be the village's next soothsayer, as she's inherited my gift of sight. She has only had a few dreams—more of the larger events in your life, I'd say. And possibly only as they happen. Though it is yet to be revealed what her connected to you will be. To dream of someone repeatedly indicates a deeper purpose, after all."

She spoke the last part to Thyra, who appeared as perplexed as Hiccup.

"You married?" Hiccup inquired. It just occurred to him that to have grandchildren meant having children. Gudrid seemed prepared for such a question.

"Yes. I married, and he was a wonderful man to me."

"You had a good life?" He had to ask; he had missed it.

"I did."

"I'm glad," Hiccup said, and he meant it.

"I am still uncertain if that was the reason I had not seen you until today," Gudrid mentioned quietly. "I had a good husband, and good children, and wonderful grandchildren," she looked down at Thyra, who smiled brightly back, and then returned her gaze to Hiccup. "But I never forgot my first
love."

Hiccup blushed and, while Gudrid smiled at him, there was something melancholy added to it.

She reached out, took his hand in her own, and patted the back of it as a grandmother would. He looked at those hands, spotted and gnarled, and remembered when they held his face and drew him in for his first kiss.

"It is what it is," she sighed. "Never meant to be, but no less real."

His eyes lifted back to hers—grey, and lined—and he felt like he was back in Hugrvöllr.

"I am glad I got to see you again," Gudrid continued to smile, continued to keep her lips pressed together, like she was fighting down laughter or tears. "I just needed to see you, to know you were real."

"I'm real," he assured her, his voice sounded far away to his own ears.

Thyra started to pull Gudrid away—Gudrid who still smiled at him, who gave him a sense of direction when his only friend in the world was a dragon. Gudrid, who gave him his first memories of true affection, who gave him Framherja.

Gudrid's hand slipped from his; Hiccup watched it fall away from him. He watched as the child and grandmother moved farther and farther from him with linked arms, one supporting the other. He watched as distance shaded their forms, blurred them until he swore he could see Gudrid as a girl again.

I never forgot my first love.

Hiccup still couldn't figure out if the love he felt was his own, or projections of her love for him in Hugrvöllr. Either way, he knew that he too would never forget her. She was real, after all.

They had found each other.

That night, the Elder passed in her sleep.

Chapter End Notes

* Art by aveku-chan-kataang
Limb-stiffies = arthritis

I feel like Tuffnut ACTUALLY said 'dude' in the movie. They said a lot of things in the movie that wouldn't pass as Historically accurate, but then, that's half the fun of mixing reality and movie!verse :)

If you didn't get it, Krankr is the twins' paternal grandfather. The twins mother is Kernalla...kernel...nut...get it? Get it? Hurk hurk hurk. Hey it was that or Nutella.

Aksel is a real Viking name. Also spelled 'Axel' in other languages. It's a family of axes! 8D
Holmganged

Chapter Summary

Hiccup's more readily accepted than Snotlout feels his position is threatened by Hiccup.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Holmganged

::What is wrong with the human?:

Toothless did not answer. His head remained on his crossed paws, though an earfin twitched.

::What is wrong with him?:

the Timberjack repeated.

Toothless' lip curled.

::Shut up. His name is Hiccup. For the last, Tiamat-forsaken time—:

The Timberjack flicked his tongue at Toothless in a rather rude gesture.

::A stupid naming of your human. I could come up with far better—:

::Well he's not your human!:

"Knock it off!"

Toothless glanced upward, his ears flat against his skull as he spied the underside of the branch Hiccup rested upon. The boy had one arm slung over his eyes to block the daylight, a leg dangled over the wide bough. Hiccup had insisted that he wanted to get some shuteye before he brought Astrid to the island. The girl promised to start flying today.

::You've already chosen the female::

Toothless continued in much quieter tones.

The Timberjack lifted his head, his tail waggled behind him.

::I enjoy her presence. She is strong. But she needs protection. I could sense it, the sad thing::

The Monstrous Nightmare huffed from his sunlit rock, a ring of smoke wafted up from each nostril.

::She seems quite capable...for a human:: he commented.

Toothless regarded the older dragon with interest. ::How do you feel about the other humans::?

::The Similars were too unruly:: the Timberjack decided.

::I wasn't talking to you:: Toothless snapped.

::The Similars were rather energetic for my tastes:: Nightmare slowly agreed. ::Though the female
made smart work of those hands. The large one lacked a certain presence about him. Too docile:

Toothless settled back down, the corners of his mouth turning as far into a frown as a dragon's face could. He knew Hiccup had been hoping for the Nightmare to take to a human, as he also felt the shared pressure of creating more riders. That the Nightmare hadn't felt comfortable around the other humans meant bringing more to the island, which meant finding more humans willing to befriend dragons.

Speaking of which...

::Hiccup:: he spoke, again quietly as though to create a gentle nudge with his words. ::It's almost time:::

Above him, the boy sighed. "Yeah, I know."

Hiccup's movements were sluggish as he seated himself, a low groan falling alongside a few scraps of scuffed bark. The boy dropped from the branch with hardly any bracing, landing in a hard crouch for it. Toothless followed suit; with his human's lethargy somehow contagious, pushing himself onto his feet required more effort than he expected.

Toothless did not need to see the sunken eyes and lines around his mouth to know Hiccup didn't get a lick of sleep during his "nap". It was more than stress that kept him from rest. Something was very wrong.

Hiccup had not been in his right mind since he returned from the village the night before—reappearing in their cove far earlier than Toothless anticipated. His human had been slow, unresponsive, and dead-eyed. He insisted that he was just tired, continued to declare so, and yet he seemed incapable of sleep.

Even now, with both feet on the ground, Hiccup hadn't moved from standing after his landing. He stared at a patch of grass, bleak and troubled looking.

Concern weighed in deep with the Night Fury.

::Hey:: Toothless nudged Hiccup under his elbow. ::Are you okay?::

Hiccup blinked, coming back into himself. He nodded distantly.

"Yeah," he said. Then he sighed again. "Yeah, let's get back there..."

Hiccup picked up the pace, hoisting their flying gear from the ground and setting to suiting up with perfunctory movements.

Toothless could sense the reservations of the other two dragons, who, before now, had never seen Hiccup as anything but cheerful and caring. Like them, he wanted the old Hiccup back. Hiccup's exhaustion proved more palpable the longer they stayed in the area; it may have started with that initial nest encounter, or it may simply be a human reaction to returning home, but something had started Hiccup on a downward spiral. It was like he never fully recovered from that sickness on their first night on this island—his temper shorter, his optimism fading...

Poison—that's what this environment was for Hiccup. And Toothless was hard pressed to continue to expose him to it.

Hiccup's familiar weight settled on Toothless' shoulders. Nothing had to be said from there on—Toothless could feel Hiccup shift in preparation for takeoff and he followed the cue. They launched
from the island, soaring through the quickly cooling air where a chilling altitude battled the sun's sultry rays.

The first several moments of flight passed silently, save for the wind whistling against the hollow of their ears and wild flapping of Hiccup's clothing. It wasn't until the finest wisps of low-hanging clouds brushed his wingtips did Toothless dare to ask.

::So are you going to tell me what's wrong?::

Toothless received nothing to hint at a response. Not a stilling of the body or any particular rush of movement. Another bout of silence passed and the Night Fury started to believe Hiccup would never answer him.

"Gudrid passed," Hiccup spoke it quietly, so much of his voice already lost to the wind, but to Toothless he may as well have been shouting.

It took Toothless only a wing-beat to make the connection.

::The vördr?::

"She was our village elder," Hiccup said in the same monotone voice. He sounded like one would when reading instructions. "We lived in the same village for fifteen years. Fifteen years...and we never knew. I didn't know her as Gudrid then...and she didn't know if I'd ever turn into—"

The man she loved.

She waited for him, even when she was married. Years and years, never knowing if the truths of her girlhood were only ever a dream.

Gods, it wasn't fair.

::I'm sorry:: Toothless offered. He knew Hiccup; he knew it could often take a day or two for the full weight of something to hit him. Hiccup felt numb now, like he didn't know how to react under the shock of it all. It read in his dazed behavior and the long spells of deep silence.

"They're sending her off this morning," Hiccup went on as though he couldn't hear Toothless.

::It's midday:: Toothless observed.

"I know," Hiccup whispered. "It's just... I just found her. And we just..."

Toothless bobbed his head, silently telling Hiccup he needn't force the words.

Hiccup had not been able to do it—he could not go to her funeral, see her body burn. Not when he felt he had no business being there, having missed her life, and not when his stomach twisted in sickness at the injustice of it all. It happened too fast; he thought he had time—time to digest her identity, time to discover the life she led between their reality and their dreams. But it was borrowed time. It expired the moment she touched his hand under the watch of Midgard.

He couldn't cry, couldn't decide on what to feel when confusion and grief continued to hold him in suspension. He still sensed that a great part of her wasn't gone, like he could still commune with her.

::We don't have to go, Hiccup:: Toothless said with careful deliverance. ::You need sleep. Real sleep::

"No," Hiccup swallowed. "Astrid said she's going to fly and we need her help. We need to find
more people to ride, and the Nightmare a partner, and we need to start knocking more dragons out of
range. I'm sorry—"

::Don't apologize you warped mammal:: Toothless immediately interjected. ::I knew from the
beginning you would behave weirdly being back in the graces of your drove::

"Sorry," Hiccup mumbled again.

Mercifully, Toothless didn't hit him for it.

"What—" Hiccup stopped and chewed the corner of his lip in thought. "What do dragons do when
they die?"

Toothless considered the question for a breath, forming in his mind the words to make a human
understand.

::I suppose:: he began slowly, ::I suppose it depends on the dragon. But in my drove, and just about
every other I've encountered, the closest of kin will fly the deceased's body to the highest point
possible in the sky. Then they release it. And as it falls, every member of their drove will send one
fireball into their body as a blessing of Good Passing—the more closely connected you are to the
deceased, the more power you send into your shot::

"So...the power is equal to how much they mean to you?" Hiccup surmised. His voice sounded half
a world away.

::The more lives you touch, the more power goes into your Vale. They say that if your body is
obliterated before it hits the ground, you spend eternity in WolcenEye. I've never seen it happen, but
then, I've only participated in a few Vales::

A small smile flit across Hiccup's face. He glanced to the sky. "Whol-sen-eye? Is that like Valhalla?"

::Brightest of the fallen tails may light the Lodestar's ferried trails; They roost within the WolcenEye
to guide still-beating wings of Sky:: Toothless recited like a childhood poem. ::I suppose it ultimately
has the same sense of covet, but ours is better—Wha—! Hiccup! What are you doing?::

Hiccup had banked left without warning. The knolls of Berk had barely come into focus and he
swerved away from them, soaring deeper into the ocean, seemingly in no particular direction.

::Hiccup—let me in:: Toothless demanded warningly.

"She's the reason...she's the reason I had to choose," Hiccup said, sounding breathy from the heat of
his newly rushing blood.

::Choose what?::

"Choose between humans and dragons—" The first hint of a crackle met Toothless' ears; they
twitched sporadically, his scales prickled with a new source of heat.

"And I chose dragons. It was because of her."

Something bobbed in the ocean far below them, burnt with dying licks of flames. Toothless could
smell the churning scent of cooked flesh, perfumed by Aspen and salt.

Something settled in the dragon's stomach, a very heavy and possibly human sensation. Toothless
felt uneasy without understanding why.
::Is that her?:

Hiccup didn't answer; his mind still spurred this impulse he couldn't fight, his fingers enabled it.

He thought of the first time Gudrid kissed him, how she had a habit of edging closer to him without him ever realizing. The way she would hold his hands and touch his face and allow her eyes to openly roam his features with such fondness he'd feel hot for days.

And how she curtailed him into playing with gods; how she ruined his life and saved it with all her twisted words and soft laughs.

"I chose the dragons," he repeated. His throat felt so tight he marveled at managing to speak at all. "I guess I should start living like one."

Toothless didn't need to crane his neck to see what happened above him. The noise of a formed arrow sounded louder than he remembered—deafening, almost—and the white-blue blaze pulsed at the limits of his peripherals.

Hiccup released the string and lightning hurtled through the air, screaming all his sickness and sadness and rage at the world. Once he let go there was no calling it back; in the next instant it struck what remained of Gudrid's pyre to create a sharp explosion atop the salted waves.

Toothless said nothing. Neither did Hiccup. They circled the remains once, two pairs of solemn eyes taking in the damage. Scattered flames riding on wood chips dispersed with the currents of the ocean. The scent of Aspen swelled further, drowning their senses.

Toothless' ear-plates tugged at the sound of a sharp inhale.

::Are you okay?:

It sounded like Hiccup was trying to get his breathing under control, but Toothless felt a hand rub behind the crown of his skull reassuringly.

::Did it help?:

"I don't know," Hiccup answered, his honesty shone through an otherwise coarse voice.
A large part of him still felt numb to it all; like either he was still connected to Gudrid or he was in denial about her passing. Destroying a person's body should have given some rise to self-doubt, and perhaps it would have had he not spent his last years learning how to survive under Toothless. He put so much energy and emotion into that shot that he felt he had nothing left to give. He felt...lifted. Lifted and, by some means, subdued. He was caught in a state of waiting.

Berk returned to their sights. Toothless folded his wings in and they rocketed towards the quickly materializing village.

"Let's land near the forest," Hiccup stated—needlessly, as they both knew it to be the most obvious choice.

Toothless was glad to hear a clearer voice.

People spotted them, of course—the black mass against the clear, sun-strewn skies. The first villager's eye landed on them and they pointed. More eyes lifted, more fingers followed; one attracted another like flies to spilt mead. By the time Hiccup and Toothless settled on the very outskirts of the forest, they had garnered a rather rapt audience.

The attention didn't concern Hiccup, nor did the few approaching Vikings; it was the activity he interrupted which seized his attention. Though Toothless' paws set firmly on the ground, Hiccup felt compelled to remain seated moment longer, simply to try and make sense of what greeted him.

"This isn't..." His voice trailed as his eyes swept the landscape.

No one looked mournful. Surprised, fascinated, appalled—yes. But no grieving could be found. The children who didn't stare in abject bewilderment of he and Toothless resumed their play. The smell of roast lamb and fresh, sweetened breads raced across the hills with the wind. He could hear music floating down from the Hall, laughter of the old and the young weaved into every note.

Hiccup hadn't the energy to get angry about it—about such verve on a day that should have been joyless—but the suspended disbelief was clear on his face.

He slid from the saddle, his feet thudding against the ground when his knees stiffened. The words 'Night Fury' popped up repeatedly, and yet the gawking and hurried whispers of those entranced by the sight of Toothless hardly registered to Hiccup.

Toothless looked back at his boy, finding this greatly out of character. ::Hiccup?:

Hiccup took a few steps away; his hand slid away from the dark hide as he mutely came to grips with an obviously celebrating village.

"Hey!" he called when his voice came to him. He targeted the closest people to pass, who happened to be the village's only other set of twins—the adult men Underbite and Overbite. They chugged by with a swinging, stuck pig leveled between their shoulders.

As one unit, they looked at Hiccup, then at Toothless, but continued moving uphill.

"What's going on?" Hiccup asked when no disparaging comment was made towards his dragon.

"Party! It was the elder's request!" Underbite said from the front end, he never slowed as he answered.

Overbite followed behind. "Aye. She had a whole list of requests when she died—and she expected them to be done."
"Hope someone got that amber amulet on her before she burned," Underbite murmured with a furrowed brow. His brother mirrored his expression.

"I thought she wanted the silver one on?"

"Not what I heard," Underbite countered.

Overbite shrugged, the spit bobbed with the movement.

"Well, she's dead anyway. No sense in worrying about it now."

"Oi," Hiccup could just make out Underbite's fading voice as the brothers trudged up the hill, leaving him as if he were any other villager on the side of the road, "if there's anyone who would return as a draugr to haunt yeh for getting her funeral wrong—"

"It's her. Aye, you're right..."

::I...take it this isn't normal Passing behavior?:: Toothless asked, moving forward a step to meet Hiccup's side.

"No..." Hiccup was unaware that he had been smiling until he spoke. "No, it's not. But I'm not surprised. I suppose this just confirms that she had a great life..."

::And a great death:: Toothless said, pressuring his temple against Hiccup's shoulder. ::You gave her a Vale worthy of any dragon::

Hiccup smiled wider. He reached around to scratch the drier scales beneath Toothless' jawfins, just beyond that blissful pressure point.

"Hiccup!"

Both males jerked at the call, and in a unified movement turned to see Stoick hustling towards them. Hiccup didn't think when he positioned his body between Toothless and his father; his feet moved him there of their own accord.

"You were supposed to be here earlier," Stoick puffed, just reaching conversation distance with Hiccup. "You missed the lighting of the—"

"I didn't want to be here for that," Hiccup said quickly. Stoick took in one more breath and then froze, his eyes having locked in on the black mass shifting behind Hiccup.

"You brought it?" Stoick asked the question with a tense glance around him, as though sensing his people were in danger.

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Toothless curled his lip, rumbling with insult. Before him, Hiccup scowled in an echo of the dragon's expression.

"From now on, where I go he goes. It's how this is going to work—" Hiccup cut himself off, realizing, belatedly, that he had started to sound demanding again in his anger on Toothless' behalf.

Miraculously, his father showed no anger at his pretention; in fact, Stoick waited for Hiccup to continue with patience Hiccup hadn't known he possessed.

When Hiccup spoke again, it was with less fervor. "I really want to get this thing going, that's all. If I have to bring dragons to them," he gestured to the village, "so be it."
He waited for the argument—some violent reaction for so much as suggesting the allowance of
dragons in the village.

Instead Hiccup's father completely flummoxed him by asking, "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Hiccup automatically replied, skeptic at the seemingly random question. He looked at
Toothless for help, but the dragon only had one ear on the conversation with his eyes following the
stuck pig making its way up Berk's hills.

"Hiccup!"

Spitelout had arrived, and behind him, his son. Spitelout stopped at his brother's side, eyeing
Toothless but making no comment about the dragon's presence. Snotlout hovered just behind his
father, sending Hiccup and Toothless equally untrusting and unwelcoming looks.

"What happened? You went to bed early last night?" Spitelout asked Hiccup. As soon as the
question hit him Hiccup recalled his promise to drop by again the night before with drink samples.

He also recalled feeling very indisposed on remaining in the village.

"I just wasn't feeling up to hanging out, sorry," said Hiccup. And he truly was sorry, for it would
have helped him greatly in building a stronger empathy with the older crowd. The news of Gudrid's
death reached him shortly upon returning to the village after náttmál; he had not made it halfway to
the Hall before he rounded back to the cove. Undeniably, the very thought of staying anywhere other
than at Toothless' side had him feeling unwell.

The melancholy ringing in the apology must have tuned in the others to his thoughts, and a somber
cloud seemed to have formed around their group. Even Snotlout turned his eyes towards the horizon,
in the direction of where they sent their beloved Soothsayer.

Spitelout nodded, his lips thinning. "Ah, it affected us all, lad. No one's to blame you."

"I had no idea you were so close to the Elder," Snotlout commented. Hiccup could feel a sense of
self-justified anger directed at him.

"More than you'd know," Hiccup responded with a dark undertone.

"Och! There he is! And he brought that ruddy beast too...!"

Gobber's bellow shocked even the Vikings that had seen him coming. Fishlegs could be seen in the
distance just beyond the blacksmith's broad shoulders, running to catch up with a one-legged man.

"Hi Gobber," Hiccup greeted, trying to brighten his face. If anyone could pick up on how deeply
Gudrid's death affected him, it would be Gobber.

Toothless' tail began to swish against fallen sticks and loose dirt in an agitated motion.

::Did that cripple just call me 'ruddy'?::

"He didn't mean anything by it," Hiccup rushed under a heavy breath.

"Lo Hiccup," Gobber returned in a more manageable volume as he came to a stop. "Nice of you to
finally show up. You were gone so long I thought you abandoned us ag—" Gobber made the face of
someone choking on a mouthful of gruel, but the words were already out. "Sorry! Sorry 'bout that.
Tactless!"
He let out a weak, nervous chuckle at Stoick's stony expression. Hiccup grimaced. Spitelout rolled his eyes, shaking his head in silent reproach.

Toothless lowered his ear plates at the sort of tension humans were capable of emitting without sound.

"Shite, he knew what I meant," Gobber justified to Stoick's continued stoicism. He turned back to Hiccup as though nothing awkward had happened. "Hiccup, I've been meaning to ask you about those armors you got on..."

Hiccup glanced down at the scale-braces. Scraces, as he called them in his mind.

"These?" he asked, holding up his arms. He saw the admiring looks from his father and uncle and pride swelled within his chest. Somehow, he knew Toothless felt the same.

"Are they...?" Gobber shot a significant look at Toothless. With the scraces and the dragon right next to each other the match was made obvious. Toothless sat back on his rump, gaining a good \textit{faðmr} in height, but adopting such an innocent look about him that none of the humans thought to react in defense.

Hiccup looked up at him with a cocked eyebrow.

::\textit{Just establishing dominance}: Toothless asserted.

"It's his scales," Hiccup said, looking to Gobber again.

"You cannot \textit{burn} dragon scales," Spitelout immediate disputed. He did not speak with the accusation of lies. He believed Hiccup; he was merely curious as to how it was done in spite of lore.

"You \textit{can}, actually," Hiccup informed the group. "But you'd need the cooperation of the dragon."

"In getting' its scales?" Gobber asked. He looked at Toothless very differently now; speculation replaced his earlier traces of restraint, perhaps entertaining the prospect of a new type of assistant.

"And in melting them," Hiccup intoned, knowing it would put quite the damper on any plans of simply \textit{stealing} scales.

Gobber didn't look put out in the least. "I'd love to see it done."


"It can't be used as a tactic to hurt them," Hiccup expressed. He stared directly at his father.

"That's not what I meant," Stoick assured him in a cautioned voice. Hiccup received the impression of being treated as a volatile weapon, almost as if Stoick were being extra attentive in staying on his good side. Hiccup wouldn't question it—he needed this sort of cooperation—even if it left him disoriented every time it happened.

He looked back to Gobber and said, "We'll stop by the shop sometime and we can really get into it. I've been hoping to use a forge at some point anyway—there are other things I want to try."

The answer satisfied Gobber.

"Can't wait. They must have amazing benefits," he said. "I can only imagine the sort of properties scales bring to armor."
"Oh yeah," Hiccup shot a smile at Toothless, "it protects me from dragon fire to a good extent—or whatever else they might fire at me."

He said this thinking of the Changewing and the acid that could have killed him if not for those scrares.

All the men, even Snotlout, could not hide their delight at this.

"And if you bond with a dragon, you will always have one willing to help out," Hiccup quickly proposed, seeing the opportunity to spin his campaign towards them.

::Sometimes, I do think you need to be burned::: Toothless informed Hiccup thoughtfully.

Hiccup ignored this, because he just caught a break in further convincing his father to adhere to a slow integration and he didn't need them thinking he was crazy...er.

Fishlegs stumbled up at that point, resting an elbow on Snotlout's shoulder as he caught his breath. Surprisingly, Snotlout did not shrug it off, but rather looked exasperated at the boy's lack of fitness.

"Hey Hiccup," Fishlegs puffed. "Hey Toothless."

"Hey," Hiccup said. Behind him Toothless nodded his head as he saw so many humans do before. It had the desired affect of both impressing and surprising all other humans present.

His greeting, however, only reached one set of ears.

::Hello, behemoth:::

Hiccup's lip twitched. "Toothless..."

Fishlegs was no longer strictly fat; he simply had a height and girth to impress Vikings and intimidate Southerners.

Toothless sniffed, unapologetic.

::Hiccup, I am so glad you are not the size of these people. I like you as you are. Stay as you are:::

Hiccup bit the inside of his cheek and dug a subtle elbow into Toothless' side.

"Ah, Fishlegs!" Stoick boomed, and he welcomed Fishlegs into their group as he had never welcomed Hiccup before: with a hearty arm to encircle the blond's shoulders.

Hiccup acted on the compulsion to briefly turn his head towards Toothless; the sight of the dragon would remind him of what he gained from such neglect.

"Sir," Fishlegs nodded respectfully.

"I've been meaning to ask you how your trip went to that island Hiccup took you to," Stoick said.

Hiccup looked up in time to see Fishlegs' whole face brighten.

"It was amazing—Snotlout, you should have come," Fishlegs threw at the chief-in-training, who glowered at the very insinuation. "I mean, just remarkable! Everything Hiccup said about them was true. Out of that Demon's control they're just..." He seemed to squint at Toothless while he searched for an adjective. "They're just...like...us."
He finished lamely, but Hiccup didn't think it could have been expressed any better. The people Hiccup brought to the island yesterday approached the dragons like one would pets—with coos and grabby hands. As one could have predicted, the dragons expressed their disapproval of it. It took some convincing on Hiccup's part to relax the Timberjack and appease the Nightmare enough to allow forgiveness.

"They had such different personalities, habits we'd never see in a raid—and so different from each other!" Fishlegs babbled on. "Our books—the things we could write, and document—Hiccup told me some stuff about the Night Fury culture, but that was just for Night Furies. Imagine! A culture for every kind of dragon..."

Fishlegs' prattle relieved Hiccup from being the center of attention, if just for a moment, and he allowed his shoulder to sag some.

Gods, he was tired. Just thinking on all that had to be done continuously weighed in on him, keeping him from ever feeling quite energetic enough for optimism. Every time he thought he made some progress with Berk, the whole picture would come crashing down on him, like discovering another stone to carry uphill.

::How are you doing?:: Toothless asked him when Hiccup began to worry his lip.

Hiccup tagged a look on his father, who listened to Fishlegs talk about dragons, and not just methods to kill them but about them. He felt that detestable crushing in his chest again.

"Fine," he whispered immediately. He was fine. He just needed to see a little more progress before he could relax any.

"What?" Fishlegs must have heard Hiccup and assumed he was the intended target.

"Ah," Hiccup blinked and straightened his posture. "Are you up for another trip to the island?"

He hadn't any new dragons yet—but tonight, for sure—and Toothless informed him the Nightmare was not interested in any that he had brought so far.

"Oh yes!" Fishlegs exclaimed. "I think I'll have to bring some old notes as well. I wasn't expecting to learn so much! I could already begin updating our records."

"Think we'll get anyone else this time?" Hiccup presented this question to the four who hadn't gone.

Gobber made a noise that sounded like "mmmm" and narrowed his eyes. Hiccup took that as a 'not ready'. Snotlout gave him a flat look, as though insulted he dared to ask. He didn't even bother look to his father. Hiccup knew he wasn't ready.

But Spitelout appeared contemplative.

"Someday?" Hiccup bid, a weak and hopeful smile on his lips.

"I suppose," Spitelout shrugged, though he glanced at his brother to ensure he had not crossed any lines. "The ones you took there yesterday were quite impressed."

"They were," Stoick agreed. "Thorston pair wouldn't shut up about it..."

"Aye, didn't leave much to wonder after they came back," Gobber chuckled.

"But there's still so much to learn," Fishlegs commented. He seemed as excited at the prospect of an
adult visiting the Safe Island as Hiccup felt. "What we saw was only the beginning—I just know it. If you just meet them, see how they behave outside of this control Hiccup spoke about, his entire idea of working with the dragons seems so much more plausible. It really can be done..."

Fishlegs' voice continued, others had chimed in from time to time in commentary, but Hiccup found he had a hard time forming words out of them. His mind detached from the present crowd. The sun felt hot on his cheeks, Toothless warm at his side. Quite warm, with a soft pressure to his shoulder. He must have started to lean on him...

"Hiccup!" Stoick barked, and Hiccup realized his name must have been called more than once given how exasperated the red-haired chief appeared.

"Are you okay?" Fishlegs asked. His brow had lowered, and it came to Hiccup's attention that this particular expression of concern now surrounded him.

"You do look a mite peaky," Gobber observed.

Blinking back his attention, Hiccup took an involuntary step backwards as Gobber leaned in. He couldn't help it; he wanted more space all of a sudden. It wasn't just proximity, it was the familiarity. He knew these people and, bar possibly two, he couldn't remember why they would give him so much consideration. It felt temporary, sudden, and out-of-place when he wasn't addressing a large group as a delegate would. This was personal—a personal regard for his wellbeing.

"I'm okay," Hiccup assured them. He put a hand to his temple, as if to try and lessen the annoying pulse using force. "I'm just not sleeping well."

Toothless dropped to all fours again and butted Hiccup's side with the flat of his head.

::You're sleeping today—I'll be sure of it!::

"What is he doing?" Stoick said, looking alarmed at the behavior. Maybe having a dragon's mouth so close to his son had an age-old protective instinct rearing up.

Hiccup smiled and playfully pushed Toothless away. "Assuring that I'll sleep tonight."

"Is there anything we can do?" Gobber asked. Again Hiccup paused to stare, because Gobber honestly wanted to know. So did Spitelout, Fishlegs and his father. They waited in earnest for instruction.

For a moment Hiccup stood there with his mouth slightly ajar. Then he started to speak.

"I...I need more people who are willing to try and befriend dragons. I need that Nightmare to pick a human. I need Astrid to start flying. I need help knocking dragons out because just Toothless and I will be too slow." They were pouring out of him now; all the inklings and worries and stress verbalized into a long stream of requirements, and as they ran out of him, Hiccup felt lighter and lighter.

He turned to Gobber.

"I need some sort of design for a filter...something that will keep poison from being inhaled—or at least dilute it."

Then, to his father, "I need this village to have a stronger understanding of how important it is that they cooperate with us. I need other villages on board because I don't think Berk will be enough. The demon's army has extended and so should ours."
Stoick nodded, looking Hiccup dead in the eye.

"Alright."

The word echoed in Hiccup's mind; the surface of his consciousness seemed to grasp at its meaning while a deeper part of him jolted in exhilaration. He felt livened by a generosity and cooperation he never saw coming.

"R-really?"

Stoick nodded, pleased at how encouraged Hiccup appeared by that one word. "I've already sent word to our neighbors that we have a new approach to the war—"

"It'll take some work. A lot of convincing," Spitelout cautioned. Having it explained in person brought forth dubiety, a letter would prove more difficult.

Gobber clapped a hand to Hiccup's shoulder. "But if you handle them like you did with our village a couple days ago I think we'll have a pretty good shot."

Hiccup stared at the hand, and then at their faces, struck speechless at their sincerity, at the support.

"Ah..."

All articulation had left him. He knew he shouldn't show surprise; he should take this in stride and maintain a façade that a Viking would respect. But Hiccup could not keep the gratitude from his voice when he said, "Thank you."

"Go and sleep," his father ushered. Stoick raised a hand as though to push Hiccup towards Toothless, but it faltered in mid air, soon returning to his side in a tight fist.

"Ah—" Hiccup unwittingly repeated. He felt bad leaving them to all this work, even if he'd be doing nothing more than advising.

No, he was the force behind all this. He couldn't leave—

"Go!" Gobber insisted against Hiccup's lingering resistance. The blacksmith did give Hiccup a small shove at the back. "We can take care of some things without you, you conceited nit."

Hiccup let loose a short laugh. Spitelout gave him a single nod for input, which Hiccup accepted with one of his own.

"Alright—thank you—"

"Go," Stoick stressed. "I'll send word to more tribes, broaden our reach."

"I'll pick through some designs for this filter—" Gobber started, and Hiccup saw an area he should be present for.

"I should—"

"He'll help me," Gobber insisted, pointing a fat finger at Fishlegs. Fishlegs jumped.

"Ah—yes! Filters for poison? I'll definitely help. I'll bring my books on poisons and poisonous dragons, it should help to some degree—" Fishlegs prattled. Facts were what he could provide, but inventing was Hiccup's forte.
Hiccup gave his friend an understanding smile.

"I'll help out when I return. I shouldn't be too long."

::You'll return when I say you can::: Toothless intoned.

"And you can show me that armor technique while you at it," Gobber said.

"I'll get a consensus on who would be willing to volunteer for another Island run," Spitlout finally added.

"Go," Stoick said again, even as he started to turn towards the Mead Hall.

Hiccup, whose head had turned in every direction a voice came from, started to nod.

"Alright, I'll—whaa!"

Toothless head-butted Hiccup towards the forest.

::Come on, Hiccup::

The others turned around, one by one, each tossing a wave at him and bidding him a good rest. Hiccup watched them go from over his shoulder, suddenly overcome with more gratitude towards these Vikings than he ever thought possible.

"I can't believe...that just happened..." Hiccup said dazedly as he finally turned his back to the village. Their destination had been set to the cove where he and Toothless silently, and unanimously, agreed to rest. "They were so... cooperative. I never thought...in all my years here, they never..."

::This has been a rather strange day so far::: Toothless reflected. Hiccup grinned, giving up on making sense of anything, and roughed a hand along the dragon's neck.

"Yes, it has."

Had it only been that morning that Hiccup thought he'd never feel happiness again? Perhaps seeing the village carry out Gudrid's requests helped bring to light that she had so few regrets in her life. She told him herself she had a good life, a happy life. She lived and died in a village that loved her—and rather than mourn they chose to celebrate the life she lived.

If humans could breathe fire, Hiccup's arrow would have never been necessary.

Hurried footsteps broke Hiccup's meditation. Toothless tweaked an earfin backwards.

::Oh—Hiccup, you need to be aggressive!::

Bewildered by Toothless' advice, Hiccup turned to see Snotlout closing the distance between them. He had momentarily forgotten about the skulking man during his deep appreciation for the other Vikings.

"Oh hey, Lout—"

"Hólmganga," Snotlout said shortly upon coming to a halt.

"Hmmm?" Hiccup goggled at Snotlout.

Snotlout leveled his stare. His dark, thick eyebrows hung so heavily over his eyes that they nearly
lost all color.

"I am challenging you to hólmganga," Snotlout clarified, slowly.

Hiccup looked around, wondering if anyone was seeing this, hearing this. Those who still gawked at he and Toothless were stationed at a distance and probably thought the cousins were in innocent conversation.

He turned his frown back on Snotlout.

"Are you serious?"

::Stand up straighter, he's challenging you!: Toothless hissed. Unconsciously, Hiccup did so, taking a breath to fill his chest with air.

"Yes, I'm serious!" Snotlout snapped. Toothless snarled at him and all aggression wiped from the Viking's face. Hiccup pressed a hand to Toothless' neck and murmured that everything would be fine.

"I'm serious," Snotlout repeated in a softer voice. But this time he kept his eyes on Toothless instead of Hiccup. "I challenge you to hólmganga for the title of chief."

"'Lout, this is such a waste of time," Hiccup sighed, dropping the stance that Toothless wanted him in. "I have no interest in being chief—I'm an outlaw. Besides, did you not hear how many things we have to get done?"

"It shouldn't take long," Snotlout grinned his mean grin, the grin he bestowed upon Hiccup before and after every episode of childhood harassment, and Hiccup felt irked.

"This is serious, 'Lout."

"I'm serious," Snotlout said and he took a step forward, heedless to Toothless' presence, so that they stood nearly nose-to-nose.

Hiccup did not step back from the challenge; he held his footing, strangely gratified by the fact that he no longer had to look up when confronted by his cousin.

::That's my boy:: Toothless whispered from behind him.

"Sondag," Snotlout went on, his displeasure with Hiccup's resolution palpable. "So you can get all your little projects out of the way."

The very idea was ridiculous—so much so that Hiccup had to wonder if he was already asleep in the cove. But the challenge had been issued, greeted by his refusal to back down, and Hiccup now felt powerless to evade it. He couldn't look away from Snotlout, for even that could be taken as a form of submission.

Hiccup didn't need to look at Toothless to know what the dragon expected of him. He could feel a pressing sense of excitement emitting from the dragon as strongly as he could feel Snotlout's belligerence.

The thin line of Hiccup's lips broke as he took a short breath.

"Fine. Sondag."
"Lock your knees there, just before those joints...yeah, that way you can better feel the subtle shifts in his wing movements..."

The Timberjack gave its wings a few, trial flaps and Astrid regarded her position amidst the action with intense concentration.

"Oh...oh, like this? Is this right?"

"Yes," Hiccup smiled. "Though you may want to lean forward a little more or you'll get thrown off."

Astrid was already adjusting her position on the Timberjack's back, experimentally testing her balance. By now, she could feel the difference between passenger and rider. She had more control, a deeper connection to the dragon and the sky that she had yet to touch on her own power.

"Ready?" Hiccup asked. She looked to have a sound enough position atop the Jack. He knew it would be better to simply get her in the air, otherwise she'd find a million things to nitpick given the chance and then they'd never take off.

Astrid gave a hesitant nod; Hiccup could see her eyes racing over her legs, her saddle, the Timberjack, trying to ensure she had everything perfect.

"Start slow," Hiccup instructed as he sprung himself into Toothless' saddle. Unlike Astrid, Hiccup didn't give his situation a sparing glance. His hands hooked his belt to the saddle unsupervised, his feet found their way into the stirrups reflexively.

::You hear that?:: Toothless directed at the Timberjack. ::Keep to the ground::

::I heard!:: the Jack huffed.

"Bend with him, relax your body," Hiccup said when both dragons prepared to launch. "You can feel what he's going to do if you pay attention."

Astrid said nothing, tightlipped, and nodded. Hiccup almost worried that she would take this so seriously she'd never get it right. Flying was about sensation, not perfection.

"Alright...Let's go!"

Toothless shot off first, with both boys knowing to curb their speed. Hiccup never took his eyes off of Astrid. She gripped the lip of the saddle so hard her fingers had gone white. She seemed to struggle between keeping to the position he guided her to and moving with the bounces of the Timberjack gaining altitude.

"You're doing fine, relax!" he called.

He saw her lips move, taking in wind. He saw her fingers slowly unknot and regain color. She appeared to be talking to herself, her mouth moving in the same pattern, over and over, gaining volume until Hiccup heard her shout:

"I'm flying! I'm flying!"

She still bent low over the shoulders of the Jack, but her hands had lifted from the saddle, testing the
strength of the air currents.

Hiccup laughed at the delighted look on her face—an overjoyed, childlike ecstasy that returned her youth, transforming her before his very eyes. Hiccup suddenly felt lighter than he had since his returned to Berk. She was doing it; soon, he wouldn't be the only rider.

"Woo!" Astrid crowed, daring to sit up straighter, to handle the brunt of the wind against her face and chest.

Hiccup cheered along with her, sharing in her energy.

"We could go higher!" Astrid challenged. Her cheeks turned to the sky.

Hiccup's smile turned placating. "Ah...let's take it easy."

The Jack, naturally, had taken to the idea. ::Yes! We need to go higher!::

Toothless rolled his eyes. ::Hiccup said no...::

::She wants it!:^

::I don't care—::

"Let's try turning first," Hiccup called, riding over Toothless' retort. "Lean and he'll follow."

Astrid bit her lip, looking far more enthusiastic with trying this new technique now that she was in the air, and shifted her weight to her right hip. The Jack followed her lead.

"Woah!"

"Are you okay?" Hiccup worried, quickly flying over her head and leveling on her other side.

Astrid didn't appear concerned in the slightest.

"Yeah!" she exclaimed. "I can feel the muscles in his neck move more with his flight changes than in his wings."

Hiccup had not been expecting the frank assessment.

"Really?"

He studied the Timberjack. Granted it had a long neck, but when in flight it tended to fold back on itself for a more compact trajectory.

"Yeah," Astrid repeated. "I mean, I feel it in his wings, but the neck is so much more...responsive."

She began stroking the bent neck as she spoke, much to the Timberjack's pleasure. Soon enough the slight vibrations of purring read in every swipe of her fingertips.

"Interesting," Hiccup murmured. He'd have to write that down. Toothless had such a short neck; all his power came from his back and chest. Perhaps partnering a stockier dragon had left Hiccup in the dark about riding different dragon-bodies.

His eyes sidled over to Astrid, who continued to gaze fondly at the young Timberjack. Even in his boyhood fantasies, Hiccup could have never pictured such a tender look to cross her face.
"Ready to go higher?" Hiccup asked, almost regretful for breaking up the moment. Luckily, both Astrid and the Jack seemed more than enthusiastic at the prospect. He grinned at their matching expressions. "Sit-back more, but tuck in closer to—yep, like that—"

Astrid and the Timberjack began to climb higher as Hiccup and Toothless easily kept pace, hovering at their back for insurance. Hiccup thanked the gods he had the foresight to equip Astrid's "in-progress" saddle with hooks to tether Astrid in. Thor-forbid they relive his first flying experience.

Hiccup took a deep breath as he watched Astrid pick up the finer points to flying. The coolness of their altitude seared his lungs in the best way. This was what he needed. Gods above, he loved flying.

::We need to do this more::: Toothless announced, possibly following Hiccup's exact line of thought.

The human agreed wholeheartedly. "Yeah, I forgot how crazy we go when we don't get to joy-fly enough."

They took an easy loop over Astrid and the Jack, teasing the trainees with the simplest of acrobatics, and Astrid's indignant shout had Hiccup laughing.

"Should I try that?" Astrid asked. Hiccup balked at how serious she sounded.

"Absolutely not!" he called over the winds, still grinning. "I think I should regale you with tales of all our accidents before you go attempting anything crazy."

Beneath him, Toothless snorted.

::We didn't have that many:::

"Oh really? Remember the first time we flew?" Hiccup reminded him.

::Okay, that was—::

"Or when we were trying to fly blindfolded?"

Countless accidents there.

::Good point::: Toothless conceded, though sharing far less humor. He remembered all the crashes now. He remembered discovering how fragile Hiccup was, the marks that humans could never fully erase from their bodies...

Astrid laughed. Hiccup looked over to see her shaking her head at him. She favored him with a decidedly critical stare.

"You are so weird," she said. There was an endearment and a curiosity to her voice.

Hiccup turned his face into a windblast to help keep his cheeks cool.

"I told you we could understand each other," he said, suddenly feeling defensive.

"And I understood as much," she assured him. "...Sort of. But it's not...it's more than I can actually understand, isn't it?"

Hiccup bit his lip, nodding, feeling a little uncomfortable with the subtle prying.

"It's really complicated," he said. Too complicated; he still didn't understand it all. "There's a lot
going on that I don't think anyone else is ready to know—it's all connected and... I'd just...I'd rather not go there right now. We have the war to focus on—"

Astrid held up a hand.

"Are you withholding information that could compromise us winning this war?" she asked, brusque.

Hiccup stared at her for a moment, slightly caught off guard by the abrupt severity.

"Ah, no. No it has nothing to do with the war, really...other than me learning of details I guess." She continued to stare hard at him until he added. "I've shared with you everything I know about the war."

_Hadn't he?_

Great, now he felt worried he was accidently withholding information.

Astrid seemed to relax from her sudden aggression.

"I had to be sure, you know?" she said in her defense. "If this falls to pieces you can just leave like —" She stopped herself from saying _'last time'_; they didn't need to go down that road again. "Well...you can just leave. The rest of us will have to live with the outcome."

"I understand," Hiccup responded just loud enough for her to hear. "I won't leave until Berk is safe, no matter how long it takes."

He didn't know where the words came from, or when they became true for him. This was more than just saving the dragons now, because more than just the dragons needed him. _Berk_ needed him; she was asking for his help.

And Hiccup couldn't say no to a direct plea for help.

"Do you promise?" Astrid asked. He saw the village's plea in her face as her eyes searched his. Beneath the aggression and the confidence lay the very same disquiet that beset every member of his home-village.

He turned his neck in the direction of Berk, just catching the outline of the island from their distance. Berk had been Gudrid's home, too—he realized—and she had loved it. She stayed and protected as she knew how to protect, and she guided and loved every generation in her time, just as she guided and loved him.

"I promise," Hiccup swore.

Astrid was satisfied. "So when can I learn how to do flips like you?"

Hiccup's lips pulled into a smile, and he turned his attention back to the blonde beside him.

"It's not all about the tricks, you know."

"I know," she huffed. "But I'm thinking they could be a...a tactical advantage!"

Hiccup raised his eyebrows, smiling wider yet. "Oh? Like this?"

He and Toothless barrel-rolled over her, leveling on her other side smoothly.
Astrid laughed, "Yes! Like that."

Hiccup sat back on the saddle; the air currents encircled his arms like tackle, sending goosebumps along the bare skin.

"It all depends on you two," he said and he gestured to the young dragon-human pair. "Just keep flying together and soon enough you'll be in sync with each other to the point where it feels natural."

He flicked the tailfin and he and Toothless did another fast spin—this time under the Timberjack—before they shot up well over Astrid's head. She followed them with her eyes, shaking her head at their antics.

::This would be more fun if we weren't doing it to make the female laugh:::

Hiccup knocked one of Toothless' earfins with a subtle brush of his knuckles.

"That's not what we're doing," he muttered. "It's a demonstration."

::Demonstration shmemonstration::

Hiccup sighed. "You don't even know what that—"

::If you want to show off for her, why didn't you just say so?::

"Wh—"

Hiccup felt the heat, the movement of Toothless' neck muscles, understood the familiarity of his body movement, just before Toothless released a plasma bolt.

"Damn it Toothless!" he yelped, flipping them upside-down just in time to avoid the fire they would have flown into.

He returned to an upright position with Toothless smug and Astrid's laughter reaching his ears before the blood fully receded from his head.

"Whoo! Yeah Toothless!" she cheered.

Toothless seemed to swell at the praise.

::The female's not half-bad::

"Oh! Now who's showing off?" Hiccup hissed to the back of Toothless' head. He tugged on one of the longer plates, and Toothless immediately tipped to that side.

::Watch it!::

"Not so fun, is it—ow!" Hiccup held a hand to the eye Toothless managed to smack with the other earplate.

The Timberjack made it to their side during their bickering, bringing Astrid back to Hiccup's right.

"How many times have you flown into those?" Astrid asked, still chuckling from the fireball incident.

"Too, too many," Hiccup muttered under his breath.
The Timberjack, realizing how delighted Astrid seemed, looked ready to try it himself.

::Do not do that::: Toothless ordered. ::She's not ready:::

"Yeah, bud, don't try it yet," Hiccup told the Timberjack, picking up the same signals as Toothless. Alarmed, Astrid looked down at the dragon beneath her.

::You need to pay attention to her emotions::: Toothless continued.

The Timberjack snapped its beak at Toothless.

::I am:::

Toothless let loose a low growl that ended in a sharp roar.

::You're not:::

Astrid watched the exchange pass with wide eyes.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "Are they fighting?"

Hiccup kneaded the top of Toothless' head hard.

"Nah, they just rub each other's scales the wrong way every now and then."

Astrid visibly relaxed. She considered Hiccup for a moment, her eyebrows rising.

"Hmm, like human like dragon, huh?"

"What?" It took him a moment longer to realize she was referring to them—or how they used to be. Hiccup puffed out his cheeks, blowing air noisily between his teeth to create a 'pshaw' sound. "No, no. You need to really hear them go at it. That Jack is a bit younger than Toothless so they tend to get on each other's nerves over some matters. Like Toothless telling the Jack what to do. Personally, I think Toothless is just reminded of his younger years—"

::I will turn around. I will turn around right now:::

"Okay, okay!" Hiccup laughed, rubbing Toothless' head. "I was just kidding, you know that."

Astrid continued to regard the pair, their interactions, how easily they fell in and out of roughhousing from their synchronization. Like one, magnificent being.

"You weren't present for the funeral," Astrid mentioned, remembering then what she meant to address with him. Her casual statement came with a furtive glance. She wanted to read his face should he try and deliver evasive answers again. "Did you know about...?"

Hiccup inhaled the salted, freshest air of the North.

"Yeah," he exhaled. "I knew."

Astrid nodded, and said nothing more on the matter. One of the finer things Hiccup came to learn about Astrid was that she rarely pressed for details on matters unless it directly involved the village.

"Oh yeah," Hiccup said, just remembering something himself. "You won't believe what Snotlout did today."
Astrid kicked the Mead Hall door open. It hurt her foot—it was that heavy—but it had the desired effect in the end: a dramatic entrance.

The Hall was busy enough for a non-meal hour. A few groups of chatting Vikings scattered the floor, a couple of late drinkers nursed their last tankard of the day, and a certain chief-in-training dined on the leftovers of náttmál after spending most of his night working with the council.

Fool in sight, Astrid stormed up to her unsuspecting friend. Snotlout lifted his head just as she slammed her hands on the table.

"You challenged Hiccup to hólmganga?" she snapped. She didn't bother lowering her voice—chances were the entire village knew of it anyway. She wanted her temper heard.

The Vikings seated at the neighboring table immediately grabbed their drinks and relocated.

Snotlout's chest puffed out, his eyes defiant, meeting her challenge. "Yeah, I did."

"Why?" she asked. She shook her head; there was a strain to her voice. A tiredness. "Why are you so threatened by him? He's not taking over!"

Snotlout's face darkened. "They allowed him in the village. That's the first step."

Astrid pushed off from the table, rolling her eyes. They happened to fall on a full tankard of mead, left by a deserter, and she clamped down on the urge to grab for it. She didn't plan on staying long.

"He's helping us, you idiot," she told him, voice flat.

"Is he? He left us, Astrid," Snotlout reminded her with a frown.

"He—"

"Yeah, I know, 'he came back!'," Snotlout jeered. "What's to stop him from leaving again as soon as things turn bad?"

"He promised," Astrid told him, quietly. As she expected, Snotlout laughed.

"He promised?" he repeated, his mirth growing. "And you believed him? Gods, Astrid, what happened to you?"

Her eyebrows lifted.

"What happened to me?" she asked, blankly.

"You used to be so...so awesome. And now you're...you're..."

He struggled in finding the right word. Astrid lifted her chin.

"And now I'm what?"

"Look at you!" Snotlout's voice rose. "Look at what you're wearing!"
She did so. It was the prototype harness Hiccup had made for her.

"You defend him," Snotlout continued, gaining anger, "you run off with him every chance you get —"

"What do you care?" Astrid interrupted. "Everything I said was true, everything he's said was true —"

"How can you know that?" Snotlout asked throatily. "You can't! You can't just take his word for it. It's too much, thinking the dragons are so innocent all of a sudden. It's...after everything that's happened, how can you defend them?"

Astrid's face softened.

"Is it so scary to think we were wrong all this time?" she asked.

If anything, Snotlout appeared even more frustrated with her.

"So you think we were wrong for defending our—?"

"That's not what I meant," she cut across. "What I mean is that...maybe there is another force at work here, and we've never actually seen a dragon's true nature before. I've seen them behave...differently. Look, you have to see it to really understand, if you just give Hiccup a chance—"

Snotlout continued to shake his head at her, continued to look at her as though she were being unreasonable.

"It's like you've forgotten everything that happened after he left," he said in an odd whisper. "All the fighting, how we struggled with the raids and the winter, how many of us died by their claws and their fire—"

Her eyes flashed in the shifting torchlight.

"I forgot nothing," she hissed, leaning forward once more. "That's why I'm doing this. I'm stopping those wars, I'm not letting any more Hooligans die, even if it means riding a dragon—"

"You like riding a dragon!" Snotlout broke in. "You like it! You like being with him —"

"Oh come off it!"

"I haven't forgotten what he did—I'm still going to protect the village from him. He has no place here anymore—no right—"

Astrid's hands slammed the table again; some of her hair fell loose from her braid.

"This is just about your pride and don't you dare say any different!"

"I—"

"No!" She snapped, tired of his voice, of his attitude. "You need to take this seriously. This is our reality now—this is our war. Not our parent's, ours. So I suggest you suck up your pride and get with the program, Lout, or you're going be left behind."

She turned and started to march back to her home; perhaps even angrier now than she was when she arrived.
"I'm going to fight him!" Snotlout called to her back. "He's agreed!"

She stopped, turning her profile to him.

"And what will you prove by defeating him?" she asked, wryly.

Snotlout picked up his turkey leg again, the shredded meat dangled off the bone, as listless as his expression.

"That I'm the rightful heir," he said with a shrug.

For a moment, Astrid looked pained.

"We need him," she whispered.

Snotlout surprised her with his scoff.

"I know that much. I'm just going to insure that he'll leave when his business here is finished," Snotlout said, his eyes dark. "Nothing more, nothing less."

Sondag arrived. Hiccup had nearly lost track of time for how busy he had been, but his productivity in the past few days had kept his spirits high.

With an evolving peace of mind, Hiccup now slept. From before sunrise up until sun's peak, Hiccup would nestle beneath Toothless' wing and the pair would slumber off whatever mischief they got up to the previous evening. Much of his early afternoons were now spent in the forge with Gobber. Toothless usually curled up by the hearth as Hiccup worked in his backroom; design after design for air-filters covered the walls like a slow-moving infection. Gobber helped with technicalities, Fishlegs helped with theoretical, but Hiccup was the one that tested them out. His nightly excursions in and around the mist taught him which materials worked best, which cloth cuts were most efficient, the layering needed for effective breathing...

His health went largely unaffected by these tests. At the first sign of a cough Toothless would steer them back into fresh air, with or without Hiccup's consent, so Hiccup suffered no oncoming sickness to tire him further.

Astrid now flew the Timberjack full time, though Hiccup still made adjustments on the saddle using her valuable input. Saddle designs were another project that kept him busy in the forge, but having Gobber's experience on hand proved a great boon.

Seven other dragons were knocked free under his and Astrid's efforts. A Rocket Ripper had chosen Tuffnut. Ruffnut had yet to find one of her own, same with Fishlegs—though the pair of them continued to visit the Safe Island.

Hiccup had more volunteers willing to ride. Astrid and the others' constant advocacy in his favor slowly turned public opinion. It also helped that he spent every other night in the company of older folk, learning more about life from them than he had his own father, gaining influence as strongly as he gave.

His father kept his promise in involving more clans; the Skullions, the Danger Brutes, the Bog
Burglars, the Devil Dogs and the Meatheads were approached. The Murderous Tribe was not contacted due an uneasy, and awkward, history with the Hooligans. Neither was the Berserk Tribe—despite Hiccup being relatively insane and, therefore, concocting relatively insane plans, Stoick and many others ruled that only the sane should try and follow insane plans.

The Meathead clan was to arrive in two days, five other volunteers were scheduled to be taken to the island today for introductions to the dragons, Hiccup had designs to run over with Gobber about new filter mouth pieces, and all this was to be put on hold so he could settle some one-sided issue with his cousin.

Hiccup wanted Snotlout's support. Snotlout would be chief of Berk, and if Hiccup planned on continuing any sort of alliance with his home village he had to get Snotlout to come around to him.

But Snotlout responded to strength and only strength. So Hiccup would have to use another Viking-dealing tactic he had learned during his stay in Miklagard.

::I think your stomach strike was a little weak—I saw it coming:: Toothless critiqued as they started their trek into Berk. The village seemed empty, ominously so, and Hiccup had to assume everyone had left their daily tasks for the show.

"You are not a Viking," Hiccup defended himself. "Of course its not going to work on a dragon—your scales are like...not-soft-enough-iron."

::And you weren't going all out::: Toothless pointed out.

"Of course I wasn't," Hiccup scoffed. "I'm not going to try to hurt you."

::I have a very bad feeling you're not going to on him either::

"We'll see..."

Hiccup frowned, glaring at the sun directly above them. Now that the hólmganga was upon him he had to wonder at his honest chances in a fight against Snotlout. Lout had power and strength Hiccup did not... he trained daily and carried an impressive history of winning.

But Hiccup had sparred against Halvdan and Harald and, surely, they were far more experienced than Snotlout. Conversely, they knew it was a spar, and likely never, or, at least, rarely, went all out on him.

So the real question was: how seriously would Snotlout take this?

The others of his old class seemed concerned in their own right.

"I'll fight in your stead," Tuffnut had told him, not long after he met his Ripper—whom he had taken to calling Rippy, in all his creative glory. "It's allowed. Snotlout...he...he's tough, ya know?"

Hiccup felt amazed, a little touched by the offer, but more so at the sort of person he had to have been for someone to assume he needed his battles fought for him.

Naturally, he declined Tuffnut's proposition and continually assured those who expressed concern that he could handle himself just fine, often with a little annoyance despite the good intentions.

::You need to take this seriously; this could determine your standing with your drove for the rest of your life::: Toothless warned him, though the dragon kept up his prance by Hiccup's side.
Hiccup knew Toothless was excited; once he explained the premise of hólmganga, Toothless viewed it as a rather entertaining sport as well as a prime touchstone in a male's life. Fighting, after all, was a huge part of dragon culture and hierarchy.

With a little introspection, Hiccup realized the same went for humans.

"I'll take it seriously," Hiccup promised. "It's not like I want to lose or anything..." He was already an outlaw, but the shame had lessened. He would lose so much ground with Berk if he were defeated. "But if I win I don't want to give the village the idea that I want to be chief. And I'm mostly sure that's what this is about...seeing as he said 'for the title of chief'."

::Hmmm:: Toothless seemed contemplative, because he would like Hiccup as chief even less than Hiccup would. ::How will we ever get out of this one?:

Hiccup heaved a heavy sigh and rolled his eyes upward.

"I was kind of hoping you would think of something."

Toothless flicked an ear toward him. ::No no...that's your job. You think of the somethings::

"Yeah, and you usually are all about the fighting, so I think we're due to switch places for this one."

Toothless sniffed. ::If we're switching places, then you're getting food tonight::

"If we're switching places, then I expect pampering."

The dragon gave Hiccup a look of utmost insult.

::What? Pamper—? When does this take place?:

Hiccup's lip twitched into a wry smile. "Every time you start whining for scratches. Read: every day."

::::How dare you:

"Oh—Hiccup!" Toothless and Hiccup both looked up to see Fishlegs round the corner of a farmhouse. "There you are. What is it with you and always being late?"

Hiccup, nonplussed, glancing up at the sun.

"Am I?"

Fishlegs sighed and gestured for them to hurry up.

"Come on, everyone's waiting."

Toothless glanced around at the use of 'everyone', as the village seemed oddly deserted.

::Where are we going?:

"We're going to the Kill Ring," Hiccup answered with a small grimace. He knew Toothless would follow him in there, and if there was one thing he never wanted to see in his life, it was Toothless in that ring. No matter the circumstances.

Fishlegs looked back, slowing so they could catch up.
"Yeah, they're going to make a huge event out of this," Fishlegs said, obviously thinking Hiccup addressed him.

"Fantastic," Hiccup drawled, though he had expected it from the moment he agreed. Some people wanted to see how far he'd come, and others, despite the support he'd garnered over his short time back, wanted to see him punished for leaving in the first place.

The sound of hundreds of bawling Vikings could be heard now, their voices meshing together to heavy the winds. The group crested the hill just before the Ring. A wall of broad backs first met their vision, and beyond it, a dense ocean of bodies to separate them from their destination. Hiccup could just make out the high, iron cage of the Kill Ring reaching up above the many heads.

"It's weird," Fishlegs mused at his side. "We haven't had a raid in nearly a week. I keep expecting one to occur at any moment."

Something in those words nudged at Hiccup's mind, enough so to distract him from the daunting task of getting through the Vikings.

"Ever gotten them in the day time?" he asked.

Fishlegs, who had been scouring his eyes across the clouds like he literally expected an attack to occur at any time, turned his focus back on Hiccup.

"No, not that I've ever remembered."

::Night Fury fire is more powerful in the moonlight:: Toothless supplied at Hiccup's side.

Hiccup looked down him in shock for a moment, then back to Fishlegs.

"There could be a reason for it," he mentioned casually.

Fishlegs nodded, his concentration falling to the ground as they walked. "Yes, I've thought there might be. Though I haven't looked into it much given all else that's been going on."

"Sometimes...dragons become more powerful in certain conditions," Hiccup grappled with his words, darting questioning glances at Toothless. The dragon nodded.

Fishlegs glanced between Hiccup and Toothless with raised eyebrows, as though sensing a covert conversation. "You think?"

"Yeah," Hiccup nodded. They had reached the very back of the mass gathering. "I would definitely look into the sort of dragons that tend to favor the night—it might clue us in to some things."

Hiccup knew he had to put his mind to the task at hand, but now all he wanted to do was talk to Fishlegs about the possibility that the demon had some kind of power at night...that maybe she would be better attacked in the daytime.

Of course, Toothless wouldn't be at the peak of his power should that be the case.

Fishlegs parted the crowd first, using his arms to gently nudge people out of the way and his size to intimidate anyone who turned to speak out against him. Hiccup stayed directly behind, taking advantage of the blond's size. People noticed him anyway; once they did their expressions would slacken and they would step back.

Next, they would notice Toothless, and the backpedaling would take on desperation.
"He's here!"

"He's got the Fury with him."

"Think he'll use the dragon to attack?"

"Mum, can I touch it? Can I touch the dragon?"

Hiccup didn’t know how long it actually took them to make it through the crowd, but it was with great relief that he stepped into the shade of the gateway, saved from both the stares and the sun. The center of the Kill Ring had a very large pelt lain out on it, scuffed and worn and at least three faðmr in diameter. The prison doors along the wall were all open, their spaces blackened and barren—long since reprieved of their prisoners. His stomach turning, Hiccup knew an old fear had just come to realization. He squashed down the urge to push Toothless out of there, to get him as far away from these people and those cages as he could.

Berk had been unreasonably accommodating thus far; he would show them his faith in that they would not lay harm to Toothless. A Viking took his word very seriously, after all, and the Hooligans, if anything, were honorable as they were hairy.

Just beyond the gate stood chief Stoick, and at his side, Snotlout. They looked to have just surfaced from a deep conversation.

"Good luck," Fishlegs bade him as Hiccup branched off to continue into the arena.

Snotlout shuffled back several steps at the sight of Hiccup and Toothless, his arms akimbo to give him a much wider appearance. Hiccup nodded to his cousin, but received nothing in return.

"Hi," Hiccup greeted his father, unfazed by the cold welcome as he stepped to the large man's side. Stoick looked down at him, emphasizing a height difference that would never be covered. Then he looked to Toothless.

"Hiccup," Stoick said gruffly. He ignored Toothless altogether, as the dragon and chief had taken to doing for every encounter. Hiccup would not complain, for the alternative would likely be negative and confrontational with all the tension he sensed between them. "He's, eh—"

"He'll stay to the side," Hiccup promised. Stoick had no choice but to take his word for it; there had already been some arguments over where Toothless was allowed to follow Hiccup—for which the resulting answer would always be the same: everywhere.

"Hiccup," Stoick said in a very low voice. His face was so solemn that Hiccup did not need to wonder at what he would say next. "You don't have to do this—everyone knows that what you're doing for this village means more than whatever this'll prove."

Hiccup shook his head, eyes steadfast on Snotlout's. His cousin's arrogance shone in the curl of his lip and the wrinkle of his nose, familiar and hated. But maturity could be sensed if Hiccup truly searched for it, a calmness and calculation, slight but present, that he never thought could have developed in Snotlout—probably from living through a war, probably from grooming.

"No," Hiccup responded just as quietly. "This needs to be done."

Stoick sighed. Hiccup could hear his exasperation, his regret, and his pride in that one exhalation.

Then the chief clapped his hands in a mighty collision of palms, livening so loudly that Hiccup jumped.
"Alright!" Stoick called to the circle of onlookers—nearly every living resident of Berk. "Challenger delivers first blow! Battler's must not stray from the cloth! Swords only! First blood wins!"

He finished his stipulations with a long, significant look at Snotlout, then Hiccup—presumably mentally telling Snotlout to stop at first blood, and Hiccup that he was allowed to take it.

Stoick began his retreat with backwards steps that seemed to take a lifetime for Hiccup. As his father moved, Hiccup became increasingly exposed to Snotlout's intense stare. The squat, broad young man had one hand around his scabbard, the other gripped around his broadsword's pommel. Flashcut, Snotlout had called it in their youth. He had grown into it, Hiccup mused; they looked right for each other—sword and handler.

The stance, Hiccup recognized—Halvdan used it—and a strangely out-of-place reassurance settled on him.

Suddenly the circle of onlookers turned into the cracked beige of the Hippodrome's stands. The unsettled dirt of the Kill Ring's parched ground tasted like that of the arena's floor.

His own hand closed around his sabre—the same blade that had clashed so many times with similar swords to Flashcut. He remembered the strength of taking those blows, the vibrations that ran into the handle, blistering his fingers with their repetition...

"Toothless," Hiccup murmured as his father stepped further and further away from him. "Don't interfere."

"Ready?" Stoick called.

::I won't::

"Begin!"

Snotlout bellowed with his charge—his sword out of its scabbard and held high nearly the moment Stoick sounded the start. His footsteps were heavy—fast for someone of his size, but traceable to Hiccup, who relied on nimble footing to survive in such situations.

Snotlout expected Hiccup to take the blow with a block as any Viking would, that much was obvious; he hadn't slowed or bothered to control his weight. Hiccup ducked forward just as Snotlout threw his sword down and landed a sharp jab to the hefty boy's side at the same moment of drawing his own weapon in one swift motion. He continued on in the same dive-like movement so that when Snotlout turned with a grunt of discomfort, Hiccup had already escaped his personal reach.

Hardly disturbed, Snotlout charged again. And again. It looked as though he expected Hiccup to take the blow each time only to find the slighter man dancing out of the way at the last second. On more than one occasion Snotlout almost scuttled off of the cloth. The audience hissed with the suspense every time.

Hiccup evaded one, two, three more times, and then Snotlout halted his charges. They stared at each other for an everlasting breath, and it was only in these moments of stillness that patches of sound would drift to Hiccup. Jeers at the lack of activity, at the lack of clashing, taunted him from above. Hiccup frowned; more so at Snotlout's change in tactic than at the reactions of those above him.

Snotlout came at him again, but this time slower. His footsteps just as thunderous but more controlled. He swung his sword, not at a run, but in a lunge. Hiccup just managed to parry it—the scraping metals sang to him like the greeting of an unfavorable acquaintance. There was no time to take advantage of an unstable opponent when they stopped throwing themselves off-balance in the
A prickle of dread rushed through Hiccup's nerves; he suddenly realized that Snotlout must have sparred with Astrid—Astrid, who could probably take blows a lot better than Hiccup could, but still of a slighter build than Snotlout. Snotlout had experience in fighting smaller persons.

Hiccup did not let this deter him. Snotlout was strong, but Hiccup was faster. He could see strikes and blows on their set course; he could make his body react in time to position himself for a parry—but only just. The limited space was starting to wear on Hiccup. He required staying out of a longer arms' reach to survive and, on the occasion, win battles. Now that Snotlout began to think about his attack approaches rather than wasting exertion in bullheaded moves, Hiccup was the one using more energy in his efforts to redirect Snotlout's power.

Hiccup banked on the assumption that his stamina could outlast his cousin's.

"Tired?" Snotlout hissed, as though sensing Hiccup's evaluation of the situation. Hiccup could hear a promising shortness in Snotlout's breath as he spoke.

He did not rise to the bait, as Snotlout attacked again. Under the pretense of accepting an overhead strike, Hiccup flit to the right of the down-swinging blade and struck the underside of Snotlout's descending triceps with a sharp-knuckled jab.

"Swords only," his father reminded, with a suddenly audible rush of 'oooh'ing overlaying the words.

Hiccup shook off the warning, knowing the 'swords only' policy would not work in his favor. Snotlout knew it as well. The larger boy had shaken his sword arm, probably feeling the tingle from Hiccup's dig. His lip curled further, obviously annoyed that he hadn't managed to scratch Hiccup, and with a fresh cry he swung at Hiccup's side.

Hiccup jumped back—his heels at the edge of the pelt, and he redirected the weaker-than-usual thrust. He pressed his advantage, going offensive and throwing his weight into his next strike. Snotlout's arm was still weakened, the blood flow still recovering, and his elbow buckled slightly under the strain of protecting himself.

The shorter man's face flickered between outrage and disbelief. Hiccup managed to push Snotlout back to the corner of the pelt before Snotlout regained composure in his arm. The roars of the crowd tickled the shells of their ears.

They commenced in trading blows in, what felt like, a never-ending fight—when, in fact, it had probably started not too long ago. Hiccup powered all his strikes from his center of gravity; he used his core to hold his balance against attacks. Hiccup was harder to throw off foot than Snotlout expected, he rarely staggered under blocks, and Hiccup knew he had surprised his cousin when, in a risky move, he struck the inside of Snotlout's sword-arm with the broadside of his blade so strongly that Snotlout nearly dropped Flashcut. Already, Hiccup knew he had performed far better than anyone in Berk expected him too, even if he could never tell if the cheers were for him or for Snotlout.

Once or twice Hiccup saw an opportunity to take Snotlout off the pelt, though it would prove a poor way to win. One time he even had an opportunity for a kill shot.

Throughout the fight, the solution to settling the battle without winning or losing continued to plague Hiccup. It acted as a minor distraction and one that cost him on occasion.

Especially now, when Snotlout managed to throw Hiccup off a block so powerful that Hiccup had to
fight to stay in the allotted space with teetered movements. Snotlout followed through with a second blow that Hiccup had no choice but to take. He felt it in his bones; it wasn't as strong as Harald's, but absolutely nothing to scoff at.

Hiccup was now off balance, and Snotlout came at him again with the sword. Hiccup knew he would likely buckle under another block—*curse these limitations*—so he slashed down to meet Snotlout's strike with all the might he had. Their blades clashed at diagonals, each jarred to a stop by the force of the other.

From there it became a power struggle. Most of Hiccup's weight had shoved to his back leg under Snotlout's press. His heels were at the edge of the pelt, the screaming of the crowd came to him again; he could feel the strain of his lower back fight under the power a man far stronger than he.

Snotlout grinned, realizing his advantage. He pushed down harder despite his ragged breathing.

"Just give up. You're not strong en—"

Hiccup risked taking a sword to the neck when he let up on his brace just enough so he could slam his head into Snotlout's face.

Snotlout staggered back, a hand touching his face that had absolute shock written all over it.

"Second warning!" Stoick boomed. The Vikings continued to howl their sentiments, the caws of the Thorston twins particularly distinct, but the murmurs and gasps had grown prevalent at his temerity.

"You're not fighting fair," Snotlout stated dumbly, with the sting of his nose to taunt him of an opportunity lost.

"Do I *look* like I'm going to fight fair?" Hiccup asked, gesturing to himself. His own width could easily be doubled to fit in Snotlout's.

Snotlout had yet to raise his sword again.

"Don't you want at least an honorable win?" His face had scrunched so hard in confusion all his features seemed to convene at his nose. "No chief would be accepted with anything less—"

"I don't *want* to be chief!" Hiccup cried. He was struck with the urge to throw something for all the times he must have said it; he would not go back to being ignored by this village. *He would not.* "This whole thing is pointless, regardless of who wins! And if winning means becoming chief, then I'll forfeit."

The decision became clear to him as soon as it needed to be verbalized. He would still help them, regardless of how they viewed him. His access to Berk, the Hooligan's cooperation...at the end of the day Hiccup knew it to be nothing more than good fortune. Unexpected luxuries. He and Toothless could always operate in the shadows; they would continue to work towards defeating the demon and freeing the dragons. After all, what's a little more dishonor in the grand scheme of things?

But he'd rather have his freedom than the approval of one village.

"It's not like I'm staying," Hiccup added for the benefit of those listening. Gasps pattered around the crowd.

"*What's he sayin'?*

*He cannot just leave us again.*
"I thought...after all this he would just sorta..."

"Aye, it only made sense for him to—"

"What are you saying?" Stoick asked, stepping forward for the first time since he declared the fight's commencement.

"What we agreed to," Hiccup said frankly. "My outlaw status is suspended as long as I help you. 'A temporary ally for the duration of this war', were your words."

Hiccup could recite those words verbatim; he rolled them in his head for ages, over and over, after hearing his father speak to him for the first time in years.

Stoick shifted, as though he just became aware of how many people actually paid attention to this conversation, more closely than they did the fight.

"Er...well, considering we win this war...that is, in light of recent developments—conclusions, if you will—a more prudent handling of the situation would be to allow you a bit longer than what was implied... Assuming that you prove yourself capable, which you have..."

And suddenly Hiccup could see Snotlout's fear much better.

This had to be stopped—this dangerous line of thinking. What he once dreamed of had become a reality he could never accept.

Hiccup immediately turned away from his father and addressed Snotlout, keeping his voice just loud enough for the spectators to understand his intentions.

"Call this a draw," Hiccup began, his sword outstretched in a point, "and I swear to you I will never take chiefdom from Berk."

More gasps scuttled among their audience, whispers of an undistinguishable taste circled the ring.

Something lightened in Snotlout's face. Hiccup could almost see the slow calculation brewing within that thick skull, so he waited patiently for his cousin to reach a conclusion. Neither boy could bring himself to look at Stoick for fear of setting the chief into objection; this was something they both wanted, after all.

Finally, Snotlout raised his own sword in oath as well.

"Just never take it from me," he conditioned. Hiccup grinned with an easy nod.

Snotlout approached, and as he did so he sheathed his sword. Hiccup followed suit, and by the time they faced each other, toe-to-toe, neither was armed.

Hiccup held out a hand first, which Snotlout gripped tightly and briefly—a sense of urgency pushing them with Stoick standing so close.

"It's a draw," Snotlout announced to Berk, stepping back after sealing their agreement.

The crowd gave a mixed, collective sigh of 'aw's and 'huh?'s. Several Vikings likely still wondered when and why the fight stopped.

Hiccup felt a weight of security settle over him—and not for escaping Snotlout's wrath, but for having come clean to the village about his intentions. It hadn't been a problem before when he was nothing more than an outlaw—unwanted and struggling for some cooperation. But his increasing
popularity in the village, just as unexpected and overwhelming as he experienced two years ago, had greatly changed the game.

He turned to his father, who stared down at him, stern and hurt.

"I guess we should talk," Hiccup said softly. People had begun to move above them, milling away now that the show was over.

Whatever pained expression Stoick may have bore beneath that beard wiped away in an instant.

"Chief before father.

"Tonight," Stoick said in a clipped voice, and he strode off with nothing further to say, gesturing for Gobber and Spitelout to follow him. No doubt an impromptu meeting between the three of them would soon occur—one Hiccup would not be privy to, being a likely subject.

From several feet beyond Hiccup, Snotlout stood, having not moved since he ensured his title. He watched as the chief walked off, Gobber and his father speaking in hushed, hurried voices to each of Stoick’s ears while they travelled.

Hiccup moved next. Snotlout watched the slighter man approach the dragon, resting a gentle hand on the beast’s head. As if sensing his gaze, Hiccup turned to meet Snotlout’s stare. He gave a single nod. This time, Snotlout returned it.

Hiccup had earned his respect, and it wasn’t with dazzling flying tricks or unorthodox methods of winning a war. Hiccup had proven himself someone worth following into battle.

Perhaps, the chief-to-be decided, it was time to visit this Safe Island his friends talked about. Perhaps it was time to see the dragons through new eyes, to try new tactics for the sake of saving his village.

Snotlout knew several were angry with him for having the audacity to challenge Hiccup. He knew several more thought it appropriate. He knew those of the elite crowd were disapproving in his timing, but approving of his propriety in his assertion for his upcoming position.

For one moment longer, Snotlout did not move. He just watched the last of the crowds clear and his cousin leave the arena, walking side-by-side with a dragon.

He would support Hiccup through this war, because Hiccup, wittingly or not, agreed to support him as chief in the conditions of their draw. And that, Snotlout thought with an air of self-satisfaction, was a victory in his mind.

A tickle irritated his nose. Snotlout sniffled and wiped it with the back of his hand, staining his bandaged wrist with blood.

Chapter End Notes

** Art by Artydesk

So now Hiccup has Berk’s full cooperation, more or less, and the real progress will begin. And, like any good plan, nothing's really going to go to plan.
Just a couple chapters left! Scary!
Entitled

Chapter Summary

Stoick and Hiccup have an overdue talk. A raid strikes Berk. The Meatheads arrive. A lot of things happen.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Entitled

Hiccup stared at the door—veined by age and colored by weather—and suffered its unwelcoming silence. A heavy breath rushed from between his lips. He craned his neck back, seeking some outside source of strength. Toothless, absolutely unwelcome in this home, gave Hiccup a nod of encouragement from his perch on the roof.

Without further stalling Hiccup let himself into the chief's house, all the while feeling uncomfortably an outsider in his childhood home. There was no cause for knocking; he knew his father waited for him.

He also knew a difficult, albeit long-overdue, conversation waited for him.

The room he entered was dark from shuttered windows and poor lighting—the only source of which arose from the hearth central to the space, blocked by a broad and stooped back.

Stoick hardly seemed surprised to have his son slip in as quietly as he had. He didn't so much as turn, instead jabbing at the fire a couple more times and sending a halo of embers into the air.

Nevertheless, Hiccup knew he was recognized; he saw his father's ear tweak back at the soft click of a shutting door.

When the popping of the subdued fire became too solitary for Hiccup to handle, he dared to take another step into the dark-cornered room. He couldn't read his father, not from this angle. He knew his father was upset but he had no idea how greatly; he had not quite figured out the circumstances for this melancholy—what exactly he had done wrong or how he could have done it differently.

Aside from not leaving in the first place.

Stoick let out a weighted breath, not unlike Hiccup's just moments before, and Hiccup saw those great shoulders sag under something that stood between bitter disappointment and lamentation. Only then did the chief turn, the flames of the hearth highlighting the profile of his heavy features.

Stoick's mouth opened—Hiccup sucked in a breath, waiting—but rather than say anything he turned away from Hiccup again and began to pace along the sharkskin rug.

Hiccup said nothing, did nothing, other than wait for his dad to begin this. Stoick had to make the first move because, frankly, Hiccup had no idea where to start. It was just like old times—he, frozen in a corner, and his father, pacing, wondering how to address a difficult son. His dad always paced.
After an eternity Stoick found his voice and his movements stilled.

"Son..."

Hiccup reacted immediately, "I'm not your—"

"You are my son," Stoick rumbled softly. He wet his lips after the declaration, an obscure sign of nervousness. Again, Hiccup waited for his father to speak; he truly did not know what to say.

Stoick rubbed his forehead and the meaty fingers skewed his helmet in the act.

"You've come a long way, Hiccup. You've always been different, and maybe it was my mistake to try and push you, but you managed to grow into your own anyway. I'm—" he licked his lips again, "—we're—grateful for your help. Impressed by your initiative..."

Stoick seemed to struggle with his words, or perhaps he lost his direction of speech, and Hiccup found an opportunity to break in.

"It may not be that way for the rest of the villagers," Hiccup pointed out. "You're the one calling all the shots. If you let me stay they have to allow it."

Stoick shook his head. He set his helmet on the lone table and smoothed his hair.

"They'll see it too in time. Even the most bullheaded of them. It's hard to keep turning a blind eye at you with the way you go on."

Hiccup had to snort at that, if only for the hypocrisy of his father calling anyone bullheaded.

"Regardless of who-thinks-what of me, the terms of my re-admittance into the village were very clear," Hiccup reminded his father.

A pained grimace stretched across Stoick's face—the same Hiccup caught a glimpse of after his fight—and without the necessity of pretenses, it stayed there.

"You have to understand..." Stoick sounded desperate. "I never thought you'd...you'd..."

"Ever grow past your elbows?" Hiccup quipped with a light grin. He had to do something to lighten this dark, oppressing atmosphere.

"Hiccup please," Stoick said, stern and weary. "The village will see reason. Every day you're more and more accepted. People want to follow you—"

"I can't stay," Hiccup said just as softly. The gloom of the room made everything feel muted, including his own voice.

"Hiccup..."

"I ride a dragon, dad," Hiccup no longer felt weird about referring to his father as such, not when he was allowed to be a son again. "Why would I...why would I ever chose to stay on an island when I can go anywhere in the world? Why would I stay here? What do I have?"

He didn't even have Gudrid, in any form.

He couldn't imagine it now—ever settling on this island. Any land, for that matter. Flying wasn't enough anymore, not when he'd had a taste of something greater. When it was just him and Toothless and the unknown his heart would beat in ways he could never describe, never recreate.
The occasional altitude would never satisfy him. A daily fly would never cancel out being anchored to one piece of land.

That wasn't freedom; that was a hawk returning to its cage every day.

Even more, what would it do to Toothless? Toothless was nomadic, born to be, long before Hiccup had ever fell in love with the same condition. Toothless needed to keep moving; therefore, he needed to keep moving.

"What do you have?" Stoick repeated. Shock embittered the question and Hiccup quickly realized his mistake.

"It's not that... I wasn't—I didn't mean you don't...that I don't—"

Gods, how could he say this? How did he tell his father how happy he felt every time Stoick looked at him with pride, even though it took betraying his village to garner it? How could he admit the shame he felt that he still sought such affection?

Stoick turned back to the hearth. "It's alright."

"No," said Hiccup. "No it's not. It's great that you want me to stay. You have no idea how happy it makes me—"

"I'm also thinking of the village," Stoick went on as though he couldn't hear Hiccup. "Of our future. If we do finish this war...by the time we do you might change your mind about staying. It could be a new world ahead of us; a place where people and dragons work together. Only you could lead us then—I'm not the only one who thinks so. You've shown that you have the power to carry out change. You'd be the best thing for this village if you were the head of it."

A part of Hiccup felt this was coming, but that didn't make hearing it any less disquieting. He had been shaking his head all throughout Stoick's speech and it was lucky the man had his back to him.

"What? Dad—so can Snotlout. He's a great fighter. He has the respect—"

"Being chief isn't about fighting," Stoick said gravely. He turned to look at Hiccup, his face as solemn as his voice. "It's about decisions. Leading Vikings into battle is good for image and respect, but that's not what leads a village. You can delegate, you're smart, you can plan—"

"I don't even know if this plan is going to work," Hiccup admitted. His father was glorifying him and it was the worst time to do so.

Stoick made a fist, confident in everything he said.

"But we can trust that you've done everything in your power to see it through!"

"You're making this seem more nobler than it is," Hiccup muttered. His face felt hot from this twisted praise. "I'm just...I'm helping in the only way I know how. It's because I can't do it your way—I can't be a Viking—"

"Your way may just be the right way," Stoick said with a small smile. "You could never take orders, and I think that was because you were meant to give them."

"I don't like it," Hiccup said because, like his father, he suddenly felt it was okay to be honest. "It scares me."
Stoick smiled wider yet.

"Yet you do it despite that. You understand necessity when I never thought you would. You learned it out there." Stoick nudged his head to the south beyond the boarded windows. "Hiccup, I believe you would be best for this village."

Hiccup closed his eyes. "Dad...you know I can't."

"You can," Stoick stressed. "Have you not been listening to me?"

"But I shouldn't. There are so many others who should be chief over me...so many great Vikings."

Stoick was ready for this argument. "They're great at following orders, not so much leading."

"A Viking should lead a village of Vikings," Hiccup said flatly. "And I will never be a Viking." There it was; that look again—like Hiccup just struck his father with his own sword. "I—I could still give orders—guide, I mean...if that's what you need. I can persuade Snotlout to see things my way, or his inner circle...I can still be an influence, if you let me," he added hastily. "It's totally doable."

"Or," Stoick sounded just as stubborn in his argument, "...or we can just ignore that whole front and have you be chief. It's not too late."

Now Hiccup felt desperate. His father was not listening to him. Stoick had that eager look on his face that told Hiccup he would block out any outside influence just so he could continue to build up an idea in his mind.

"It is too late," Hiccup said sharply so that Stoick would actually look at him. "I can't fit in here. Not anymore. Dad—I...that ship has sailed. It could have been if things had been different, maybe if I had made different choices, but..." His eyes fell to his scraces and Toothless flashed in his mind. He thought of how easily Toothless could shed his scales now, how early it happened—Toothless' shock and calm acceptance of it. With a quiet certitude he said, "I can't regret what I've done, what I've chosen to do. This is how it has to be."

Much of Stoick's eagerness had drained from his face to leave it stony with dismay.

"You're choosing for it to be like this. Just like you chose to leave."

For once Hiccup welcomed the disappointment, as it meant Stoick was starting to pay attention to his words.

"Maybe," Hiccup conceded. "But it's a choice I believe is best for me and the village." Stoick appeared unmoved at Hiccup's decision, so he tried, "Look at it this way: if I hadn't gone, we may have never figured out a way to deal with this demon."

Stoick snorted and put his hands on his hips.

"Oh, was that your purpose then?" the chief spoke with a sarcasm usually marked by his son. "You were born in this village for that sense of loyalty, so that you'd later use your persuasions to our benefit? That's a load o' crock."

"Maybe," Hiccup said with a tiny grin. Now his thoughts had moved to the Elder and how she knew, long before any of them, how his upbringing in Berk would influence his path. "I'm not going to disappear. I just—we need to keep moving."

"Why?" Stoick whispered. The unattended fire behind him began to die along with his earlier
Hiccup shrugged, his smile rueful. "It's in our blood."

Amazingly, Stoick's bearing softened though lost none of its sadness.

"Ah," he spoke so lightly he could have been talking to himself. "You just like your mother."

And this, above everything else, struck Hiccup hard.

He knew his father loved his mother dearly, still did to this day, despite her absence in both their lives. Stoick had a look about him, a weary, lonely stance that hammered Hiccup's conscience with guilt because he had seen it so much as a child. He just couldn't recognize it for what it was back then.

Still, he couldn't stay. He couldn't.

"Dad..."

"I know I wasn't the best...the best father..."

Hiccup reeled back, not liking the path this conversation took, hating how uncomfortable it was.

Moreover, an apology—if that were what this was—would be meaningless at this point.

"It wasn't your fault," Hiccup muttered, wishing for the comfort of Toothless' body heat. He had trouble looking at his father, despite knowing Stoick suddenly felt the same way. "You were chief first—that's where your priorities should have been."

Stoick turned his eyes to the window, imagining the scenery past its shutters because staring at his son started to hurt. Hearing Hiccup's words hurt worse. A dead mother, a chief for a father, present only in proximity...it was no wonder Gobber knew Hiccup better than either of his parents had.

"I don't think that's an excuse," Stoick said. His voice had gone gruff.

From the corner of his vision, Stoick could see Hiccup shrug again.

"What's done is done. I'm an adult. I'm choosing to help you win this war, and then I'm choosing to leave. If you don't want me to have... I mean, if you want me to retain my outlaw—"

Stoick found the strength to look at Hiccup.

"No! No, that's not..." Stoick took a breath. "It's still in discussion right now. But there's a fair bit of talk about you...you being a Hooligan, provided your methods actually win this war."

Hiccup drew in a breath just as he heard a subtle thump on the roof above them. Toothless wanted him to accept this.

"I would love to be...to be considered a part of Berk in someway because, believe me, I never wanted to cut ties like I did." Hiccup wet his lips in the same way his father did. "I want to make it right again, I do. I will do everything in my power to save Berk—"

Stoick regained some eagerness.

"That's what I mean—you would make a great chief—"
Hiccup held up a hand, shaking his head. His stomach rolled at how his father's face brightened. He had to keep talking.

"I've already sworn to stay until its safe again—"

"It's the right choice," Stoick insisted. "They'll see it too, the village will. You need the option of coming back in case you change your mind—"

"You need to know where I stand," Hiccup cut in, "where my priorities are..." He troubled himself for a moment over how to say this without upending the longest conversation he and his father ever shared in recent memory, but it needed to be known. "If I could have my way, no one would get hurt trying to finish this war. I want to protect Berk, I really do, but I will always have the dragons in my mind. In terms of safety, I'm going to think of them first—"

He stopped talking; the look his father gave him was one of the utmost betrayal.

"You were chief first," Hiccup reminded him, and it killed him to say it, for this would be the release of his last childhood whims. "I'm telling you this so you can make your decision to reinstate me with that in mind. Don't... For this, don't think of me as your son. For the sake of the village."

"That's what makes it so hard," Stoick said with a sudden hoarseness to his voice. It was the closest Hiccup had ever heard his father come to crying. "A chief wouldn't feel as proud of you as I do."

Hiccup opened his mouth to respond, but the words he thought he had ready on his tongue left him. He took in air, trying to keep his composure in the face of hearing words he'd always dreamt of hearing.

It was because his father showed him such affection that Hiccup knew he could not lead him astray with any false hope. It was sick, how happy just knowing his father wanted him back made him. There was always the possibility that Stoick was simply interested in keeping the chiefdom in their family line and now hiccup had the power to uphold it. There was always the chance Stoick saw Hiccup as a bargaining chip to keep dragons working along side of them so that they could be used as Astrid suggested a week earlier. But it was still more attention than he had ever received from his father—positive attention, to which he never thought he'd feel. He basked in it for a moment, embraced it.

"Look," Hiccup managed after clearing his throat, "dad, I just want you to know what the plan is. I don't want you thinking everything will...that I'll still—"

Stoick nodded curtly. Hiccup could see he had fallen into that Chief role he spoke about so much; it was a crutch for his father, a way to block out too many feelings he didn't know how to handle. The openness of their conversation had ended without any further warning.

"You'll not stay; I understand," Stoick said starkly. "You're still aiming for no casualties; commendable, but naive."

"I aim high," Hiccup said wryly. Stoick took no heed to the comment.

"The Meathead clan are coming Tirsdag," he informed Hiccup. "They'll be bringing about twelve representatives and they expect a sound plan and a good demonstration."

"I'll have a number of riders ready by then," Hiccup promised. "We can show them the benefit of bonding with dragons."

Stoick nodded and his back turned to the fire. Even with nothing said Hiccup could read that this
was a dismissal.

Hiccup returned to the door, making his movements loud should his father call him back.

He wrenched the heavy thing open and already his thoughts had moved from the strained conversation to his volunteers, like the blast of outside air reminded him of his responsibilities beyond the personal. Already, Speedifist had managed to ride a Swiftglider a few times—but then, everything in Speedifists' life was fast—while Tuffnut's progress was slow but solid. If he had three prime examples, excluding himself, he could be persuasive. But more would be better.

He needed a greater variety of dragons to match with Berk's volunteers. Tonight he would taunt the demon again.

"Hiccup?"

Hiccup paused, one hand on the frame, one foot colored by the sun's touch, to show he heard the quiet call.

"It's a big world out there." He could hear Stoick take in air. "No matter what happens or where you choose to go after, don't forget about us."

Hiccup smiled into the sun.

"I never could."

Luring out dragons turned out to be unnecessary for Fishlegs' fears had come to pass: a raid occurred that night.

It was on his way to the nest that Hiccup saw them coming—a cloud of wings and screams, heard before seen. He and Toothless immediately turned and used every speed known to them to make it to the village with time to spare. They paused only to warn Stoick before they set off again, this time to the Safe Island.

Once there, Toothless convinced any dragons who had spent significant time with a human to try and follow them to Berk. It was the ultimate test for how strongly a human had to bond with a dragon before it could function in Her range. As Astrid and Speedifist were two of the first to start riding dragons, Hiccup was not surprised to see the Timberjack and the Swiftglider intrepidly following behind them.

By flight, the journey back to Berk was a short one and the incursion had yet to arrive. They circled the village, looking for a safe place to land. Defenses were raised, Vikings armed and stationed, and most of the livestock hidden with the extra warning time.

"Hiccup!"

Hiccup looked down to see Astrid in the village square waving her arms; though it was more her stationary position among the running Vikings which made her stand out to him.

Her call alerted many to his presence for which Hiccup felt silently grateful. It would not do to be shot down by those of the same side.
He swooped down to meet her. Astrid jogged to them. Her eyes widened when she saw who followed.

"Chip!" she cried and she finished her arrival at a sprint, passing Hiccup and Toothless without any other greeting.

Hiccup looked at Toothless and mouthed 'Chip?', to which Toothless shrugged.

"What are you doing here?" Astrid unthinkingly asked the Timberjack. Naturally, she could not understand any response he might give her, so she turned the question to Hiccup. "What is he doing here?"

"Suit up," Hiccup instead ordered. "We'll be defending the village a bit differently this time. Find Speedifist—"

"Right here!" A tall, wide-shouldered youth sprinted to their group with one hand holding a multi-rimmed helmet to his head. He had craggy, black hair that bounced against his shoulders and a droopy-cheeked face. Though not quite as narrow-waisted as Hiccup, he was one of the more slender Vikings on the island. Speedifist's feet skidded to a stop, his smile wide and sharp-toothed. "And you have Slowpoke! Hey—!"

"Suit up!" Hiccup repeated at a shout.

Astrid, who had transformed into the grim warrior at Hiccup's order, grabbed Speedifist by the shirt and hauled him to the forge at a sprint, where equipment was stored in Hiccup's old backspace.

Hiccup shook his head, directing to the dragons, "Seriously, what is up with these names?"

Toothless stared over at him, flat-faced.

"...Right..."

"Oi!" The boys both startled to find Tuffnut trotting up to the group, his spear resting on his shoulder and his eyes scanning the dragons. "Where's Rippy?"

Hiccup flinched, slightly abashed, and said, "He's not ready yet."

His apologetic look seemed to have gone ignored; Tuffnut took on such a petulant pout it would have seemed better suited for a ten-year-old.

"That's bullshit, man!"

"Next time," Hiccup promised without much conviction, "for sure."

"Ready!" Astrid announced. Hiccup turned to see her just finishing saddling her Timberjack. Her harness was strapped around her shoulders and her axe across her back.

Speedifist stumbled past her toward his Glider, fumbling with the fixings of his saddle. He seemed extraordinarily disheveled and unorganized when next to Astrid, who had taken on the appearance of an exemplary soldier: cool, calm, and waiting for instruction.

"Excellent. Mount your dragons!" Hiccup instructed. As Astrid gracefully leapt upon her Timberjack and Speedifist hauled himself upon the Swiftglider's shoulders, Hiccup took a moment to scan for his father.

What he found was a good number of Vikings showing them attention when they should have been
preparing to defend their village.

::He's not here:: Toothless informed him. ::The secondary of your kindred is approaching::

"Hmm?" Hiccup looked to where Toothless nudged his head.

His uncle stood out among the rushing bodies by climbing a top a wagon. Spitelout cupped his hands over his mouth.

"We got the defenses up," he called from his distance. "We're focusing on higher attacks and disabling them. If it comes to it we will kill!"

Hiccup raised a hand to show he understood. He turned back to the other riders, suited and fitted to their partners, and suddenly realized the village would see firsthand what a team was capable of.

A nervous excitement overtook him, one that aroused Framherja. She hummed against his back so strongly even Toothless could hear her purr.

"No," Hiccup murmured, trying to quell his energy to mute hers. "Not tonight."

"Hiccup?"

He focused on Astrid, who looked at him with great expectation. The other faces came to his awareness; so many eyes focused on him, so many ears waiting for instruction.

"Alright!" Hiccup called for not only the attention of the riders but also those who had gathered in curiosity. "Until we can free the dragons we will have to treat them as enemies...to an extent!" Some familiar faces grimaced—ones that had been to the Safe Island before. Those that had bonded with dragons were learning. That they looked troubled with the thought of attacking other dragons heartened Hiccup more than he would ever admit. "You may have to fire at them—it will hurt them, but not likely damage them permanently. Aim for body and legs. Avoid wings and tails. We don't want to cripple them; we just want to drive them off until we have a chance to free them. If you can, capture them."

He focused more closely on Speedifist and Astrid, "You need to be careful you don't get knocked out by any Vikings. Stay high if you can, try and knock them out—there's a point roughly ten vika from here," he pointed to the direction of the Safe Island. "If you can lure or chase any over there and push them off...well, you've seen how they act outside of it," Astrid nodded. Speedifist shrugged. "You'll know when they're free; the behavior should be obvious. Don't trouble yourselves too much with dragging them out there—focus on buffering them from the village—"

The first roar sounded from the blackened abyss above the dark ocean.

"'Ere they come!" one Viking bellowed and it spurred every Viking on the island into a frenzy.

"UP!" Hiccup barked.

The riders launched into the sky. Hiccup could sense more than he could see Astrid and Speedifist follow.

"We're going to see how many we can take down before they reach the village," Hiccup informed his crew. "Be careful!"

"Don't worry about us!" Astrid hollered back.
"Yeah!" Speedifist added. He leaned back in the saddle in a show of confidence. "We totally—
aguh!"

Speedifist gripped the neck of the Swiftglider when he nearly fell off backward.

"Comforting," Hiccup drawled. He pressed forward anyway, shifted his ankle, and disappeared from the eyes of any human watching.

He and Toothless sped through the night, comfortable in their element, with the water rushing underneath them and the clouds shifting slowly above.

::There's a lot:: Toothless cautioned all too soon. His earfins twitched like madly.

"We'll be fine," Hiccup murmured with his head down to the wind.

::We will be fine::

"So will they," Hiccup responded. He knew Toothless thought him to be too optimistic, but something in his gut told him those dragons felt ready to test the Control for a reason.

He could hear the wings, disturbingly loud when unseen, and the unnerving rasp clouding around the Mindless abraded his ears—nothing less than pleading whispers on the tenterhooks of words, yet still so inhuman.

So unnatural.

"Let's knock them into the water!" Hiccup hollered, trying to focus on their assignment rather than how upsetting he found the dragons' situation to be. Just two years ago that had been Toothless. "It will slow them down at least!"

::Right!::

They rocketed upward, crested at the belly of the night clouds, and dove using both velocity and skill.

They first barreled into the back of a Devilish Dervish, its size no match for their speed. It screamed at the unexpected tackle. Toothless continued to flap his wings, driving it down in its state of shock to take out two other dragons directly below it. All three ended up in the water.

"Yeah!" Hiccup crowed, throwing a fist into the air as they started a fresh climb.

::How many do you think we can knock into the water before they make it to your grounds?::

Of anything in the night, Hiccup could see the lights of Berk most visibly—their fires and beacons creating a halo around the island. They did not have much time.

"Twenty-five!" he decided even as they began another dive, this time aiming for a cluster of Gronkles.

They ended up only getting twenty-four into the water, and that was because some of water-strong dragons were like Toothless in that they could still fire even when wet. The boys welcomed the challenge.

All too soon, their game of knocking dragons down had come too close to the village and the sounds of battle too prominent not to participate.
::Let's get back:: Toothless decided. Hiccup consented by switching gears and pulling a quick wingover.

They arrived into chaos. Hiccup recalled watching raids from the shop window and thinking the village had never seemed more crowded, but the air was far worse. A labyrinth of wings and tails and unmanned weapons cluttered their world. They couldn't fly half a faðmr without having to employ seven evasive maneuvers.

It excited Toothless enough for Hiccup to pick up on.

::Headbutting time:: Toothless announced with a buoyancy that brought a smile to Hiccup's face.

"I found one already," he responded as a Viking with a sheep under each arm ran along a housing ridge. Hiccup focused on the Gronkle swooping claws first at the fleeing man.

The boys sideswiped the dragon, catching its oversized head and sending it spiraling off course. They didn't slow or stop to see what became of it; they kept moving to the next attacking dragon.

A "Thanks!" had followed them back into the sky, where they looked for more areas to sneak in and do damage. Berk did not accommodate their piloting as the open ocean had; they had to worry about avoiding friendly fire and village obstacles, keeping the dragons they knocked out from causing more damage, staying out of the way for those fighting...

Hiccup quickly found it easier to stay above most of the hubbub; he could skim dragons off the top without interfering with Berk's battle dynamic. It also allowed him to keep a better eye on the new riders. Hiccup watched as Speedifist's Swiftglider yanked a Zippleback off its barn-bound course by grabbing its neck as it flew overhead. The jerk of tackling another dragon would have dislodged Speedifist had he not had his harness on. The boy appeared shaken but determined to continue, now more aware of the perils of flight.

"Fish!"

The name, and the voice, snatched Hiccup's attention to the shadow of the forge where Astrid and her dragon hovered. Chip fired a streaming jet of fire at a diving Nadder. The bird-like dragon squawked as it dodged, tail recoiling, and abandoned its target to find something easier.

A grounded Fishlegs hardly seemed to notice how close he came to being spiked.

"Hey, hey...you're okay," Fishlegs coaxed to a Basic Brown. The dragon hissed at him, but could neither attack nor run. Blood welled from a mangled foreleg, which she kept raised and bent close to her mouth.

"Are you out of your damn mind?" Astrid roared down at the blond. "If you're not fighting, get inside!"

Most people would have cowered when having Astrid Hofferson direct such a tone at them, but Fishlegs remained defiant.

"I can't leave her—look at this!"

Hiccup didn't know if Astrid looked, but he certainly did. It was definitely a Viking-made wound that afflicted the Brown's leg; too much bruising surrounded the area, the abrasions clean with a whittler's care.

"You can't stay here, Fish!" Astrid argued. "You're right out in the open!"
"She's going to get hit," Fishlegs said, desperate for Astrid to see his reason. "Someone will hurt her!"

Fishlegs got a little too close to the Brown and it shot a weak stream of fire at him. He stepped to the side, hardly fazed.

Astrid, on the other hand, looked horrified.

"You can't do anything for her! She's feral!"

"She's not attacking me—"

"She will if you get close enough!"

"Fish," Hiccup called, flying over to them. "She'll be fine for a little while. Don't endanger yourself over this." He looked down to Toothless and said more quietly. "Toothless can you get through to her?"

::No:: Toothless said without needing to try. ::She's definitely under control::

Hiccup knew this even as Toothless spoke; he saw the vacancy in her eyes, glassy and unseeing. But he also saw Fishlegs—determined to get this dragon to safety—and he knew exactly how the larger boy felt; that feeling of involvement that made it impossible to turn away.

Heat shocked the back of his neck when a ball of fire streaked by his back. Thinking fast, Hiccup made a quick mandate.

"She's stunned now, but don't let her try and fly off. After the raid we'll load her onto a boat and take her to the Safe Island. In the meantime, don't get too close to her; you're not going to get through. Stay by her if you have to and redirect Vikings, but stay out of danger if you can."

"At least arm yourself!" Astrid yelled down at Fishlegs. She seemed to have not yet forgiven him for almost getting himself killed. "And don't turn your back on the battle!"

Fishlegs grinned at the reluctant permission.

"But I have you watching it!" he said as she turned and flew off into the fray.

"Blarney of a dead man!" she returned in the distance.

"Take care!" Hiccup bid, and he followed Astrid's path. She turned at the east watchtower to charge a Dimbruiser, while he interfered with a Dervish's attempt to take out a braizer.

He passed Speedifist on more than one occasion; the young man went on rocketing around blindsiding dragons, sometimes into structures or fighting Vikings. Astrid was a bit easier to keep track of; she was more calculated in her attacks and far more precise. Periodically, the two new riders would herd dragons far enough away to knock them out of range, where the freed dragons from days ago would wait for them. Hiccup marked them as this took place, feeling accountable for anyone and anything under the influence of his program.

::Uh...Hiccup...::

Hiccup took his watch away from Astrid and redirected it to where Toothless stared. He felt his face slacken.

"What the—?"
It was the Nightmare from the island—in complete control of his actions with his clawed wings braced on the ground. And on his back, clinging to the blunted, jutting spikes, was Snotlout.

"Hiccup!" Snotlout cried through his clumsy attempts to stay seated. "How do I do this?"

He had a wild look of fear and amazement to his features; he behaved very much like he had no idea why he decided to take the Nightmare's offer.

For one speechless moment Hiccup could only sit on his saddle, bemused, choking down the wild urge to laugh.

::Hiccup:: Toothless prompted.

Hiccup shook his head.

"Just...sit on his shoulders, lean forward...and—" He swooped down, cutting so close to the side of a house it looked as though he would crash into the water barrels. In a deft move Hiccup swiped a spool of rope belonging to the homeowners, curved back towards Snotlout, and threw it at him. "Use rope to hold on to him for now!"

Snotlout caught the line in one hand, managing shoddy, makeshift reins in very little time. He gave the rope around the base of the Nightmare's neck a few tugs.

"Like this?" he asked.

People around them were slowing in their battling just to stare at their future chief atop a Nightmare.

"That's fine for now," Hiccup said. "Stay low to the ground. Let the Nightmare do most of the work."

The Nightmare took that as a cue to take off. It was jerky and choppy; the Nightmare was as unused to a rider and Snotlout was to riding a dragon, but they made it into the air well enough.

Hiccup hovered above them, feeling a fresh layer of worry settle over his shoulders now that this first-time riding experience was taking place in the middle of a raid. It released—only a little—as he continued to watch a messy first-flight take place.

There was something Snotlout had that made for such a quick aligning between him and the Nightmare. Be it a lack of thought or a penchant for acting on impulses—something made picking up the basics of flight easy for him. Snotlout wasn't in danger of over thinking things.

"I don't—" Hiccup continued to feel at a loss for words. "He just met that Nightmare today!"

And not too long after his talk with his father. Once on the island, Snotlout had gone straight for the Nightmare and visa versa, they had gotten along swimmingly—but hardly a full sun cycle had occurred since.

Toothless could understand a human's confusion over the matter.

::That Nightmare had been waiting for him::

"But—wait...what does that even mean?" Hiccup continued to struggle with the quick bonding.

::That human had all the qualities he deemed important, and all the room for improvement he felt he could influence him on. When you know, you know::
Hiccup shook his head, knowing he shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth.

"Ha...ha...!" Snotlout's laugh, slow, breathy and cautious, could be heard from their altitude. He bobbed on the Nightmare's neck, seated just behind its head.

"Well if that's not a chief for you, I don't know what is," Hiccup quipped.

Toothless snorted.

::Chiefdom is for the short-sighted::

Hiccup laughed and they dived back into the battle. Arrows and bolas flew all around them, but with Toothless' night vision and Hiccup's reaction timing, dodging would never be a problem. They flew circles around the new riders, of whom Hiccup had kept nearly as much focus on as he did the dragons. He felt responsible for them, particularly Snotlout, who had no prior experience flying. Should they get hurt, he would have to accept full liability.

But they performed wonderfully, occasionally needing direction from Hiccup, but otherwise amazingly conscious of their limits...for Vikings, anyway. Astrid stuck to basic maneuvering, Speedifist continued with his quick cycling—possibly knowing better than to use sheer force against stockier dragons—and Snotlout, surprisingly, adhered to his instruction to stay low to the ground, using force and flame to protect his home.

Before Hiccup knew it, they left. The dragons were leaving, flying off into the night sky as dead-eyed as they arrived.

And, for the first time that Hiccup could remember, Vikings cheered at their departure.

"That was the shortest raid I had ever seen!"

"Hardly anything was taken!"

"Did you see those kids?"

"Hiccup was so fast—those Night Furies are insane—!"

"I want to try it; I think I'm ready..."

He saw Astrid grounded, surrounded by Vikings, talking animatedly in response to their questions. The Timberjack seemed nervous around so many humans, but soothed into staying by her side as she unconsciously stroked its neck.

"Thanks for getting that Blubberwing off me back!"

"How did you not get cut riding that thing?"

Speedifist remained in the air, flying in victory circles, spurred into continuing the dizzying cycle by the rowdy calls of his friends.

"Go higher, I saw you going higher earlier!"

"Ride no hands! Hands in the air!"

Hiccup's father and uncle stood, uncertain, near Snotlout and the Nightmare. They were quite a bit more subdued than the rest of the village, but their quiet tones relayed their awe. Snotlout looked more proud than Hiccup could remember ever seeing him; and it wasn't the arrogant sort, but a pride
born of accomplishment and joy.

Even amidst all the fanfare Ruffnut's whine reached Hiccup's ears:

"I can't believe the Nightmare chose you!"

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"I can't believe how well that worked to our advantage!" Hiccup's voice echoed within the confinements of the cove. Much splashing followed thereafter as the young man waded into deeper waters.

Never before did he think he warranted a more deserved bath. Already a week's worth of grime clouded the tarn in his immediate vicinity.

::Yes you can:: said Toothless. ::You've been making great headway with your drove::

"We have," Hiccup acknowledged, "But I'm serious. I was really worried we wouldn't have enough examples of riders to get across to any other tribe. The Meathead clan is coming in one day. We are going to be the prime example of what bonding with dragons can do. There are so many actually listening to us—and so many that are my age! It's awesome!"

Toothless sat in the shallow water, enjoying the crisp touch on his sun-saturated scales. The bight within their cove was perfect for this sort of sanctuary with its light waterfall to keep the water moving and fresh and its large stones to shield them from the common entryway.

::Is it better the that younger of your drove find this appealing? I'd think you are just happy you have your peers' approval::

Hiccup spun with a loud splash.

"What?"

::Wouldn't it be better to have the elders approve:::

"I mean...that helps. But we live shorter lives. If you expect anything new and crazy to take hold, you need to target the generation that will be elders." Toothless continued to scrutinize Hiccup until the boy sheepishly added, "Well...that's my theory anyway. But I'm pretty confident in it. Just look at how many people are really listening to us now!"

Nearly as soon as the sun had risen and repairs were well underway, Hiccup had a number of individuals vying for a visit to the Safe Island. His Mánadagr morning had been spent surveying another mingling party and helping ease the tension between two old enemies. Tuffnut and Ripper bonded over an impromptu fishing expedition, which resulted in a soaked rider. Astrid and Chip helped those who wanted to try flying.

Ruffnut now had a Puffnadder—a very arrogant bird for a very earthy girl. That Basic Brown took to Fishlegs almost as soon as she was taken out of the Control—a particular dragon for a tolerant man. Hiccup could almost see a pattern in the dragons and humans which took to each other; a balance of qualities.

::It does seem to be turning in our favor::: Toothless admitted. His voice sounded far off to Hiccup.
"Hey, are you okay?" he asked. "I mean...with seeing those dragons under control again?"

::It just reminded me of what we're aiming for. It was a good thing::

Hiccup nodded and gave Toothless a humorless smile.

"We'll free them, buddy. I promise."

::How many dragons were killed::

"Seven bodies to be counted," Hiccup said as he began to scrub soap into his hair. "...most ran off. The injured are at the Island and I think they'll all make a recovery."

He ducked under quickly, popping back up with a think layer of suds remaining in his hair.

::How many humans::

Bubbles ascended from Hiccup's submerged mouth as he blew out a breath. He lifted his head after a moment.

"Astrid said not nearly as many as usual...which I guess is good. Mostly injuries and property destruction. People are taking it as a sign that following us is a step in the right direction."

::And as long as there's progress::

"Right." Hiccup stood, the water falling to his waist, and grabbed his soap rock that he had floating by on a piece of wood. "It was weird though...not as much food had been taken either. It was like they weren't even there to raid for anything."

Toothless did not seem surprised by this assessment.

::I think it was a warning::

Hiccup paused in the act of scrubbing his chest.

"A warning like...she knows what we're doing?"

::She knows:: Toothless said with such certainty that Hiccup knew he had been thinking on this for a long time. ::She's had to have figure it out by now. Our repeated visits, the loss of her dragons::

"But she'll only lose more dragons if she keeps attacking Berk," Hiccup pointed out. "The more dragons we get, the more potential riders we get, the more dragons we can save in each raid."

::Right. When dragons and humans work together it proves effective—more effective than even she could anticipate::

Hiccup smiled. "It does."

::I think that means we're getting closer to a final fight::

"Hopefully we'll have enough support by then, and enough of her dragons on our side to stand a chance."

::Or even a plan::

"Or even a plan," Hiccup agreed.
He dunked under again and swam a few strokes closer to the waterfall, popping back up on the other side of Toothless. Toothless appeared unimpressed.

::You swim like a human::

"You swim like a human."

The water was too deep to stand, so Hiccup took to gentle treading. Topic aside, there was something incredibly calming about the weightlessness of floating. Second only to flight. He closed his eyes and relaxed onto his back.

"And then...after we miraculously survive, and save Berk...and our moment of—did I miraculously survive?—we'll go see your family."

Water pushed heavily at the right side of his body. Hiccup opened one eye to see Toothless float by.

::No::

Grinning, Hiccup closed his eyes again.

"I'm serious. We're going to do it. We're going north if we survive," Hiccup hummed. He particularly enjoyed the contrast of the cool water lapping against his sun-heated skin.

::Don't you want to try and go east::

Toothless circled him like a shark. His body wiggled from side–to-side with a tail to follow, his feet tucked in to his trunk.

"I want to go west too," Hiccup confessed. "I want to go everywhere. But I think we need to go north, you know? I think we need to finish all our unfinished business before we can really move on."

::Move on to...::

"Absolute disengagement."

::That sounds...negative::

Hiccup opened his eyes to squint at the sun.

"Yeah, it does," he decided. Then he shrugged, "I'll think of a better word..." Hiccup grabbed Toothless' tail as the dragon continued to circle on by, "if you give me a ride."

::Hatchling:: Toothless scoffed, but he allowed the extra weight and slowly pulled Hiccup around the pond.

::Going north will be pointless:: Toothless continued. ::It'll be too cold for you and there's nothing more I can do up there::

"We need to find your drove! Don't you think they miss you?"

::Perhaps:: Toothless said slowly. ::But it's been so long...::

"Not too long in dragon years, I'm sure."

::Long enough::
Hiccup felt something in his stomach—an uncomfortable unease, like he knew precisely of what Toothless thought of.

"What about that dragoness you mentioned—the "perfect one" you called her?"

::Lost cause. She was far too desirable, and I already told you of my friend—he's certainly gotten her, if she did not kill him in Primary. I'm sure she has a clutch of her own by now. Shame...we'd have amazingly strong dragonettes...with the bluest scales and the longest tails...::

Toothless sounded rather like Astrid, and continued to as he went on to list all the benefits of he and that dragoness having a clutch together.

Hiccup released the tail, ducked underwater and swam a little closer to the shore. He resurfaced to hear: ::...full survival even...::

"Full survival?" he repeated in curiosity.

He turned around, just rubbing the water out of his eyes only to see Toothless right behind him, the water lapping at his belly.

::Most die in the eggshell. The forming of their furnace is the most volatile process—any outside disturbance could set them off. My drakehood was filled with horror stories of entire clutches setting each other off, killing their broodmother—::

Toothless stopped speaking. He sat up, his earfins perked.

Hiccup managed to snap out of his disconcertion to ask, "What is it?"

Then Toothless smiled at him—teeth retracted and gums glistening. Hiccup had long-since learned to associate that smile with bad, bad things.

"Hiccup?"

His heart jumped to his throat just as something heavy seemed to have settled in his stomach, reversing the cool effects of the water. He saw his clothes piled next to a large rock and thought maybe, maybe, he could reach—

"Ah—! Aww..."

Too late. Astrid had just rounded the corner. In a shining moment of clarity, Hiccup had the good sense to drop down so that the water rose to the very bottom of his ribs. He scowled at her just as she laid eyes on him.

"Whoops!" she giggled. A hand went to her mouth to cover an obvious smile.

Hiccup had never felt more disturbed. Not even when Toothless was describing unborn baby dragons unwittingly killing each other.

Why was she giggling? He had never heard her giggle before—perhaps wondered how it would sound—but now was not the time for it. There could be no more inappropriate time for it!

"Hi Astrid," Hiccup said with his droll voice. He hoped she'd take the hint that he wasn't up for conversation.

"Hi Hiccup," Astrid returned with far more cheer.
She removed her hand from her mouth to reveal pressed lips, which gave away her struggle for composure. Clearly, it was the only thing she struggled with. Hiccup hated how completely at ease she appeared with his state of undress; elated, even, with the position she caught him in. He felt an annoyance towards her he only experienced one other time—a week ago before just before he introduced her to flight.

"This is a really nice spot you got here," she noted with all the air of pleasant conversation.

"You've seen it," Hiccup reminded her with irritation. Why wasn't she leaving? What was wrong with her?

Astrid grinned and placed her hands on her hips. Her eyes scanned the waterfall.

"I've never really appreciated it before," she said in earnest admiration. "The water's very clear."

"Odin's—!"

Hiccup turned around. He didn't know if she was messing with him or not, but he didn't want to take the chance.

"Where is your sense of propriety?" he called out over his shoulder.

Toothless had taken to circling him again, careless to Hiccup's distress.

::It's with her armored scales...which she's failed to bring today! Look at that...::

Hiccup bared his teeth. "Quiet you—!"

::This is such a fun form of your human, verbal Primary!"

"What?" Hiccup yelped as quietly as he could. "What are you talking about?"

Astrid's laughter rang in his ears.

"Oh stop being so priggish! I've seen naked men before."

Her voice echoed off the barriers of their rocky confinement; it somehow managed to augment his indignity.

"I'm not—I'm not being priggish!" Hiccup objected. But he didn't turn around. "And I don't care who you've seen naked! This is ridiculous—"

"Where did you get that scar?" Astrid asked. An honest intrigue had entered the conversation, one separate from her game of dragging out his chagrin.

Where'd he get...?

Oh.

Reacting on instinct, Hiccup turned forward again.

"No where!" he insisted before his shoulders stiffened at the realization of his action.

How see-through was the water? Should he turn back around? She'd already seen the scar, but if she observed it longer she might get an idea as to what sort of weapon gave it to him.
But if he faced forward...

Hiccup tried to coach himself into gaining control over the situation. Women had seen him naked before. What did it matter?

*It wasn't proper, for one thing.*

But since when was he proper? Toothless had a lot of influence in having him second-guess human ideals. His body was his body, who cares if she saw it?

*But he'd be working with her for the duration of this war. That might make things awkward...*

"Hiccup?"

He had been silent too long. That playful grin on Astrid's face had started to fade, and Hiccup remembered the question she just asked.

"Ah—" He couldn't tell her. He simply couldn't. Before he returned to Berk he would have never revealed the crimes of her axe out of spite, to keep from her the satisfaction of her blade wounding him.

Now, however, he felt he had to protect her from ever knowing what her beloved mother's axe did to him.

"I...fought some Vikings," he said quickly.

"Really?" She leaned against the rock, sounding interested.

"Really," Hiccup said. And after a beat, "No really. Are you really going to stand there?"

She was smiling again, properly distracted and obviously still enjoying this.

Hiccup's shoulders sagged. Toothless passed around him again, his earfins perked and his expression as amused as Astrid's, and Hiccup thought in idle defeat, 'What would Toothless do?'

Toothless would probably do things Hiccup didn't have the yarbles to do.

*Verbal, human primary indeed.*

"I'm going to get out," he announced. He had finished bathing anyway; his skin would start to wrinkle should he stay any longer. With the shade of red he'd gone he would look like an overripe crabapple.

"Okay," Astrid said, but she didn't move. Hiccup pulled a desperate face.

"Just...turn around for a moment, will you?"

"Alright, alright," Astrid muttered like he was being absolutely unreasonable and spun to face the large rock she just traipsed around moments ago.

"And cover your eyes!"

Astrid gave a long-suffering sigh.

"Gods above, you're acting like a common village girl..." But she slapped a hand over her eyes with half a smile to curl her lips.
"Astrid..."

"I won't look!"

She heard the sloshing rising in pitch and then the soft pads of bare feet on land. Picturing where he stood, she attempted to glance over her shoulder with the most unperceptible movements of her neck.

A black wall greeted her sight. Her eyes came to focus on the dragon sitting directly behind her, his wings spread like a great, veined curtain.

"Spoilsport," she whispered to him. Toothless smiled.

"Why are you here anyway?" Hiccup called from behind his impromptu dressing room.

Astrid focused on the spot of wing where Hiccup sounded.

"I was just flying around in the Control area. We were testing out his mental strength. I figured you were here."

"We...so where's Chipwooden?"

Astrid sighed, finding this modesty act a little overdone by now. None of the other guys were this shy.

"It's Chipwood, and you know it." She had almost taken to calling him Shearcloth or Ripwraps or Ruinedmynewleggings, for as much as she came to adore the Timberjack he was too excitable with his wings around her clothing. As it turned out, her father showed the barest hints of favor towards the dragon when he found Chip's usefulness in gathering firewood. "He's off hunting something. I think he's fine on his own around here..."

Figuring that if he could mock her naming-choices he must be decent enough, Astrid stepped around Toothless. The dragon didn't so much as move to stop her, most likely sharing a similar mentality.

Hiccup's back was to her, exposed as he worked the tie to his pants—the only article of clothing he managed to get on in his time on land. She cocked her head, her focus immediately falling on that scar.

It intrigued her. It stood out starkly against his freckled back—a grayish-pink, smooth and shiny against a patterned complexion. Her feet brought her closer to the curiosity.

"I can't believe you named him Chip," Hiccup muttered to his feet. "That's the last thing I would ever think looking at him. I know you mean it an action but people are going to think 'description'. At least Toothless can retract his teeth. There's just no basis for calling a Timberjack something so..."

He continued to mumble to himself—probably to her—but at a volume indicating no particular recipient. He didn't hear her approach, just as she didn't hear his words.

Astrid reached out and her fingers brushed the puckered skin of the scar. Hiccup jerked at the pressure. He spun, the look on his face one of wild shock. Then it fell to warning.

"What?" he asked, guarded. He had taken a step back, no longer behaving with his modesty in mind.

Astrid stared at his chest as though she could see right through it in an effort to continue her observation. The line of nerveless flesh was straight, precise, and calculated, falling across the bumps of his spine. It was deep—she could tell just from that brief glimpse. There was no restraint with its
"What Viking did that to you?" she asked. Her voice had hushed as the severity of such a wound came to her realization. She wanted him to turn again; she wanted to observe that blemish some more, because everything she saw in that instant pointed to a killing blow.

Every move she made was countered by a guarded posture.

Hiccup's jaw clenched.

"It doesn't matter."

"I think it does," she immediately argued. "The length of that—"

"It doesn't matter," he repeated, stronger. "It was my mistake."

As he said it Toothless released a long, low warble.

Hiccup gave the dragon a miniscule shake of his head; they didn't need to think about that.

"What did you come here for anyway?" he asked. "Did you want to go for a fly?"

Astrid seemed to blink a few times.

"Ah—yeah yeah. I was...There was that maneuver I saw you use yesterday. I wanted to try it."

Hiccup nodded.

"Yeah, sure."

"Is it from your bow?"

"What?"

"Your scar," she reminded him. A recollection of how he carried that bow across his back struck her—they would align, the bow and that scar. "Is it a...a friction burn?"

She knew it to be wrong before the words left her lips. Stupid, even. That was no burn scar. Astrid knew battle wounds; she knew her scars from bearing and delivering.

"No," Hiccup said again, and he sounded more short-tempered this time. She could sense his discomfort on the subject, and that he was being so frank in his answering—not playing his game of redirecting conversation—told her she was trying his patience.

"It's just..." It was just so big. So particular.

Astrid needed to stop—she knew she did. Hiccup looked at her; his lips pressed tight, his eyes focused under a lowered brow, as though waiting for her to ask him one more time.

"...It's just that I...I can't get Chip to arch back in those loops. He's stiff."

Hiccup visibly relaxed. He saw the topic-change for what it was but appreciated her dropping of the subject. He pulled on his shirt as measure of finalizing the end of their conversation.

"It could have something to do with his frame," he said. "When he comes back I'll have a look at his ridge. You may have to alter your own body movements until it feels comfortable for him."
Astrid tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear and nodded. She looked to the commonly used entryway of the cove, put two fingers to her mouth, and blew a sharp whistle at the forest.

Hiccup jerked at the shrill sound. Toothless' earfins flattened to his head.

::Isn't that a common way to summon those domestic, furred beasts?:

Toothless referred to dogs. Hiccup narrowed his eyes.

"You call him by whistle?" he asked.

Astrid allowed herself a small smile and turned to face both boys again.

"He called me by whistle first."

And then a resonant imitation of the whistle returned to them from beyond their sights, startling a covey of birds into the sky.

By the end of the day Astrid had pulled off that maneuver—the reverse-half Hiccup called it. Chip dropped her off home and flew back to the Safe Island, where dragons knew they wouldn't have to worry about a deranged Viking losing it and attacking them. She told him to return for her at first light and she knew he understood in that uncanny way dragons could understand humans.

Normally Astrid would feel more pride at achieving a useful, albeit showy, maneuver like the reverse-half, but something had weighed in on her cheer for the duration of her lesson.

She dropped her harness on the ground as she kicked the door shut with her heel. Her eyes fixated on the opposite wall—their honor wall, of weapons past. Her mother's axe was on that wall, left of her grandfather's shields and below her father's old sword. That axe was unusable to her; not only had she outgrown it but it now held a tragic sort of memory to it. It was sacred in a manner beyond that of lineage. It was the last memento of her mother.

Her feet brought her to it just as they had brought her to Hiccup—out of her control with her mind trying to grasp at something.

She plucked it off the wall, sighing in nostalgia and frowning at its feel. Her mind pushed the sting of its misalignment with her palm to the belly of her thoughts, and instead wondered if it had been used at all under Hiccup's care.

She spun the halt in her hand, observing every side of each blade, counting the unrecognizable nicks in the bevel. It had been polished and unused since, she could detect that much. She could also detect one blade far more braised than the other. She had always made it a point to manage both equally.

Her hand closed around the steel in pace with the closing of her eyes. She focused on its cool texture against her skin and was suddenly unable to keep down the rush of bitterness for having it stolen from her.

Why had that fool even taken it in the first place? An axe didn't fit him. That bow seemed more appropriate, even if he only ever carried it around like a child's comfort toy.
Her thumb traced the length of the more damaged bit, toe to heel, reacquainting her mind with its exact reach.

Her fingers had touched something of similar length not too long ago.

Astrid opened her eyes.

Why had Hiccup been so evasive about that scar? What Viking would give it to him? She knew what it looked like, what blade it appeared to have come from—she had battled humans before—struck them—but...no. It couldn't have been this.

Yet something continued to nettle her, something forced her to stare at the worn bit, the concentrated abrasion near the center of the blade, where it hit something hard.

Action seized her. Astrid swung the axe up, her shoulder rotating in a much familiar manner, and sent it into a support beam at a downward angle. The image burned into her mind: the length of the damage visible and its depth measured, where the harshest notch on the blade fell to the wood.

"What are you doing?" a deep voice roared from behind her. Astrid's shoulder's jumped, but she didn't turn. Her father had returned from the fields.

"Just testing something out," Astrid muttered.

She ripped the axe from the wood as effortlessly as if she struck sand; the sound of splintering may as well have been the sick squelch of blood. Mechanically, she placed the axe back on the wall and headed to her sleeping quarters, ignoring the splutters of her father.

She did not need to look at the mark left in the wood. She had already seen it once that day.

########

Vikings would never be of a silent breed. The Meathead representatives convening for a final decision in the Mead Hall whispered as only Vikings could—a standard indoor voice for most people.

Unfortunately, not even curiosity would quell the numerous murmurs and "whispers" of the surrounding, graciously separated, Hooligan Vikings, who's deep and rumbling voices kept Hiccup from picking up any sort of verdict.

"Feeling optimistic?"

Hiccup snorted at Fishlegs' question. His arms crossed in a show of impatience.

"About as optimistic as I get," he remarked. "I'm not overly worried, if that counts for anything. I think we had a pretty good pitch. And they're just about in the same boat as Berk was a while ago. We have desperation on our side, and their desperation should put them in an agreeable mood."

Fishlegs made a very dubious noise in his throat.

"They don't look like they're in an agreeable mood," he commented.

Indeed, they did not. Most, if not all, of their guests harbored deep glowers and often bared several yellowed teeth in a sneer during their heated discussion.
Hiccup shrugged. He could not recall ever seeing any other expression on a Meathead's face—no matter their mood.

"That's just their faces," he said with an air of decisiveness. "They're Vikings."

Fishlegs arched an eyebrow and gave him a slow, distasteful look; it was such an Astrid expression that Hiccup found more amusement in it than anything else.

"Are you saying Vikings have something mean about their faces?" Fishlegs asked.

Hiccup turned his eyes back on the Meathead clan with lips pressed to fight a smile.

"You're frowning," he pointed out under his breath.

"This is disapproval," Fishlegs deadpanned, "not anger."

"You're still frowning."

Fishlegs shook his head, his eyes rolled back to the Meatheads.

"When did you become such a fomenter?"

Hiccup took his attention off the congregated guests, not to look at Fishlegs, but to look up, where he could see Toothless lounging on the rafters. His lopsided tail swung off his stoop; his hide camouflaged him to all but those who knew where to look.

"I'm a victim of corrupt nurturance," Hiccup resolved. He spoke quietly but he knew his dragon could hear him.

::Sorry, I'm not sorry:: floated down to him from above.

"Yeah, I know you're not," Hiccup whispered back.

"What?" Fishlegs asked.

Hiccup shook his head.

"Nothing. Look, don't worry too much about these guys. Even if they don't agree now, they'll at least know there's a second option—one I know they'll be forced to choose when things get too dangerous for them. But I do think they'll come around to see our side today. They saw us flying around outside. I think that was a nice introductory. They looked impressed." Hiccup then grimaced. "Though, it probably would have gone better if Clueless hadn't fallen off."

Fishlegs gave a short laugh. "He's an idiot."

"That he is," replied Hiccup. "Come to think of it, I wouldn't be surprised if they try to throw that in our faces just to buy them a little more time to play the 'Great Viking Hero' game. We do need to account for that Viking-stubbornness."

This time Fishlegs honestly appeared exasperated.

"I think you have plenty of that for someone who says it with such distaste."

Affronted, Hiccup took his eyes from the Meatheads to say directly to Fishlegs, "My stubbornness—if there is any—is completely non-Viking!"
Fishlegs chuckled.

"You really don't want to be a Viking, do you?"

"I'm not one," Hiccup said simply.

"You think that," Fishlegs argued back, and Hiccup suspected his father wasn't the only one who thought he had returned to rule the village.

"Gudrid thought so," Hiccup said, far more subdued. Her name now sounded odd to him; he had two faces in his memory to match it.

"Who?"

Fishlegs' innocent question completely threw Hiccup off.

"The Elder," Hiccup answered, bleak.

Fishlegs remained bemused. "Her name was Gudrid?"

Hiccup blinked, shocked into realizing his error of assumption. Of course the Soothsayer of a village would drop her name and take on the title of vǫlva. He hadn't known her name either. Not as a boy.

"Yes," he forced out. "It was."

"Huh," Fishlegs murmured, noncommittal, and said nothing more.

The Meatheads continued to argue amongst themselves, thick, hairy, braced-covered arms thrown in the air during their animations. Still, Hiccup could make out no words for the noise of the waiting Hooligans, and read no lips for the solid beards on their faces.

"Sorry," Hiccup said after a troubled moment. Realizing that Fishlegs may need some clarification he added, "I'll lay off the Viking stuff."

"It's alright," Fishlegs shrugged. He knew Hiccup would always harbor a bit of resentment for never fitting in. Hiccup forged his own path in the end, but no one could fully let go of their past.

Hiccup shook his head with a touch of frustration to tighten his jaw.

"It's just...seeing the Meatheads, and Thuggory, just brought back—"

"I know," Fishlegs stopped him. "Thuggory's a lot like Snotlout used to be."

Though shocked by Hiccup's return and, more so, the dragons flying around, Thuggory moved around their village with all the air of a privileged heir. He raised his eyebrows at Hiccup, the younger's banishment coloring any of Thuggory's past opinions of him.

"He was nice to us to piss off Snotlout," Hiccup declared in a flat voice. "It took a while for me to realize that. I think...now that we have Snotlout's support..."

"Do you think he'll be difficult simply because of that?" Hiccup could hear the incredulity in Fishlegs' voice.

"I don't know..." Hiccup murmured. Truthfully, he did not think this at all, but an old fear kept nagging at him. "It sounds ridiculous. I have no idea if he's changed any or not, or if he would actually behave that way."
"He's practically chief now that his father's on his death bed. If chief grooming helped Snotlout get his head out of his ass then I'm sure Thuggory won't be too bad," Fishlegs said. Amazingly, Hiccup's felt much of his worry settle with that logic.

They went back to Meathead watching, trying—in vain—to figure their decision before it was announced.

For a third time Fishlegs asked Hiccup a seemingly unrelated question.

"Why didn't you use your bow?"

Hiccup's eyebrows lowered and he slowly turned his head to see Fishlegs staring at the muted instrument at his back.

"In the battle," Fishlegs quickly added, "on Sondag."

Hiccup bobbed one shoulder and turned his attention forward.

"Wasn't the right moment," he answered. The truth of the matter was he saw no reason to. He didn't want to hurt anybody—and he had an uneasy hunch that he may have caused more damage by trying to use it in the chaos that night; both in others' distraction and in his inability to truly control the amount of power he put into it. He had fresh riders to focus on, not harming dragons.

Fishlegs clicked his tongue, not looking put out in the least by Hiccup's less than forthright response. He too went back to staring at the Meatheads.

"Astrid warned me that you do that."

"Do what?" Hiccup asked in a distracted voice. Thuggory now seemed to be in a lively discussion with one of his aides. He was thumping his fist on the table, repeating some word that Hiccup could just barely make out...

"—You don't answer questions directly. She said you're difficult just for the sake of being difficult."

Hiccup scoffed. "She said that? She did? There's the pot calling the kettle black. I've never met a more difficult woman!"

Or a more perverse one. He had not spoken to Astrid since their impromptu lesson the day before, nor was he inclined to. He was still fairly miffed at her.

Fishlegs chuckled, looking warmly several faðmr down their semicircle where Astrid, Spitelout and Stoick spoke with eyes focused on the Meatheads just as they did.

"Ah, yeah, she can be a handful," Fishlegs said ruefully. "I suppose it's part of her charm."

Hiccup followed his friend's line of sight for a spare moment. Years ago he would have been in awe at seeing Astrid speaking with the chief, looking so comfortable with the leaders. He wouldn't feel surprised—certainly not with her tenacity and capabilities—but he would be awestruck nonetheless.

Now he felt pity for her; he knew how pedantic those political talks could be.

"She's not like I thought she was," Hiccup admitted. "I learn more and more about her everyday..."

Astrid liked being in the know. She had a sense of humor that didn't involve cruelty. She could be really easy to make laugh when directed at the right thing. She liked challenges, she liked improving, and she took the safety of her village very seriously. She still hadn't figured her life out, and she was
still learning how to slow down.

"Yeah," Fishlegs said dismissively, having known this for years now that they had been central figures to the war together for as long. "She puts up a tough front for the sake of getting things done to protect the village, but when she winds down she's pretty fun. Underneath it all she's a bit..."

"...Mischievous?" Hiccup mumbled. He turned his eyes back on the Meatheads.

Perverted is what he meant to say but he'd rather not allude to that embarrassing encounter if he could help it. Toothless still thought yesterday's ordeal to be hilarious.

Fishlegs laughed, somehow knowing exactly what Hiccup meant.

"She hung out with Ruffnut too much, that's the problem," Fishlegs decided then and there. "But it's been good for her, I think. When your entire life becomes fighting you start to find fun in every other thing you do, you know?"

Hiccup wasn't sure if he did know.

"Speaking of Ruff," he transitioned, "it looks like she's taken to that Puffnadder and visa versa."

Fishlegs nodded, familiar with the development.

"She's calling it Fidget." At Hiccup's look Fishlegs added, "Because she doesn't know the difference between preening and fidgeting."

Hiccup snorted. "And how about you and that Brown?"

"Horrorcow—okay, look, I went to throw her a hoof the other day and she freaked out. She'll only eat fish and grains."

Hiccup let the name slide for his curiosity's sake.

"Grains?" he questioned, perking up. "What about fruit? Because I know Toothless thinks the idea of eating fruit is repulsive."

"How do you know what Toothless thinks?"

"Let's just skip the part where I redirect your question—"

"—because you're not going to answer—"

"—and you answer mine."

Fishlegs sighed as though Hiccup were the most insufferable person he had ever met.

"Fine, but—"

"We've reached a decision!" Thuggory boomed. It was an impressive volume of speech that even Stoick gave a nod of approval for. It had the effect of muting much of the sweeping conversations. "But we require some clarification on your part."

He said this staring straight at Hiccup. Hiccup looked to his father for permission to head this discussion and received an allowing gesture of his head.

He turned his own nod toward the opposite heir.
Thuggory began to summarize, "So you want us to use dragons to get to the dragon's nest—very ingenious—"

Already, Hiccup wanted to smack his head. He should have foreseen this, that the Meatheads would follow the same logic as Astrid. He caught her eye from across their distance and was startled to find that she appeared just as troubled as he.

"No," he said quickly, pulling his gaze back to Thuggory's. "I want us to work together with the dragons."

"Yes, yes," Thuggory waved off, restive. He pointed his aloft hand at Hiccup, recognizing him as the force behind the plan.

"So we ride into this demon's nest and tear her down."

"That's simplifying it," Hiccup explained with patience. "This is a process, and it is one that has to be efficient with time and progress due to her swift rising in power, but also thorough—because if you haven't bonded enough with a dragon, you cannot protect it from her control."

"Protect it!" Thuggory's laugh thundered along the walls and his fellows jeered behind him much as Berk had in their first meeting.

No one else joined them in their mirth—even Hoark frowned at the heir—and Hiccup's distain for such a reaction was smothered by the realization of how far Berk had come in such a short while. Hope kept him in good spirits.

Thuggory finished his laugh by straightening his posture and puffing out his chest.

"I think you're a little too progressive, kid," he said with the last of his laughter fading from his voice. When Hiccup showed no visible reaction to the barb Thuggory pushed on. "You've claimed to have been to the nest, yes? Tell us the coordinates and my men and I shall travel there ourselves to finish the beast once and for all."

"You need dragons to get there," Stoick said with about as much patience as Hiccup felt. "And you need Hiccup to teach you how to ride them."

"No boats," Hiccup added, having told them this already. "Remember?"

Thuggory nodded, but his frown was profound. He knew the reliance he would have to put on Hiccup. He didn't like it, but he could find no way around it.

"We can take a couple volunteers to the island where the dragons are safe—see if you can't bond with them...then I can show you how to ride," Hiccup offered.

Thuggory looked behind him, meeting the eyes of several of his staff. Some nods passed between certain men; messages were conveyed with the intensities of their stares. Hiccup held his breath as Thuggory faced forward once more.

"Very well," Thuggory stated. "We will do just that."

Hiccup couldn't fight the smile on his face. He wanted to look upward at Toothless, sideways to his father, and continue to hold Thuggory's gaze in a show of strength all at the same time.

"Great—awesome—you can sail over to the island. Just follow me and Toothless," Hiccup instructed, and then he turned away to Fishlegs, hoping his father would tend to their guests now and
make sure they were ready to sail. "Fish, I want you and the others to come with—"

"Of course we will," Fishlegs replied as though there were never any question as to where they
would be. He looked over Hiccup's head and waved Astrid to them. Hiccup glanced over his
shoulder to see her approach just as his father moved to the Meatheads.

"I can't believe it," Hiccup rushed out in an excited whisper. He wanted to get this boyish energy out
before he had to deal with either Astrid or Thuggory. "They're going—we have another tribe on our
side!"

Fishlegs appeared torn between amusement and censure.

"I still don't like him much," Fishlegs stated. He could see clear over the many heads separating them
from Thuggory and Stoick. Thuggory spoke to the chief of Berk looking aggravated with his own
decision.

"He's always been tolerable," Hiccup somewhat defended the heir. Now that Thuggory showed the
slightest hint of agreement Hiccup felt far more charitable towards the man. "And he's much more
cooperative than his father would be."

"Thank Odin for small favors," Fishlegs muttered. "But I'm still not looking forward to the meet-n'-
greet that's to come."

Hiccup grimaced, imagining some of the more swing-happy Meatheads meeting the dragons on
peaceful grounds for the first time.

"Right. Neither am I."

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Hiccup held the piece to his face. The scales felt cool on his cheeks and jaw and the tip of his nose.
He took a deep breath, feeling the air come to his mouth slower.

"How's that feel?" Gobber asked. He stared at their combined efforts with a mixture of criticism and
approval; pleased with the overall product but unable to help himself from looking for flaws. This
time they found the perfect temperature for what they needed.

"Alright," Hiccup answered with his muffled voice. "Very nice."

The blacksmith sniffed, nodding, but didn't smile.

"Fits you well o'nough. Still have to work on the straps—you can't hold it to your face like that when
you fly."

"I could," Hiccup argued in an absurd fit of pride. "But I would choose not to."

Gobber rolled his eyes and turned back to his workbench where a flat of leather had been laid out.
He began to measure out the thickness and width of a good belt strap to encircle a head.

"At the very least it'll match up with that body armor there," Gobber muttered as he concentrated
marking out a straight line.

Hiccup looked to the vest armor. It was an experiment with a higher dragon-fire to human-fire ratio,
one that resulted in a more flexible material than the mask and braces.

"Think I should put it all on?" Hiccup suggested.

"Nah. People might mistake you for a Night Fury."

"Wouldn't want that," Hiccup murmured with an exaggerated shudder.

A tail swept the floor and slapped at his ankle.

Grinning, Hiccup turned to face his dragon. Toothless was stretched along the wall just under the open shop window, resting in a slumber of the lightest scope.

"What do you think?" he asked, continuing to hold the mask to the bottom half of his face.

Toothless opened one eye but left it narrowed.

::Take it down for a moment::

Perplexed, Hiccup pulled the mask away from his face and observed it for any particular defects. It was smooth and curved, perfectly cupped to his features. It had been made in layers, several breathing holes in each which overlapped. Linen in between for filtering. It was the most effective method of diluting the poison. Not perfect, but far better than nothing.

::You rat:: Toothless snarled. He picked his head up off of his paws and brought his earfins to attention. ::You have that nasty mammal fur all over your face::

Hiccup yelped and jerked the mask back to his mouth.

::It's because you're in your village isn't it?:. Toothless went on. ::You're trying to show off to your kinsmen! To the females!:

"No," Hiccup whispered. His eyes darted between Gobber's back and a dragon who looked ready to pounce on him. "No, I just forgot is all. I've been busy with the—the Meatheads—"

::You've been facing away from me every chance you get:: Toothless accused him. ::You planned this and don't you deny it! Remove it! Remove it at once!:

"I can't—," Hiccup countered, and in his agitation he pulled the mask away from his face. "I'm working!"

"Stop making excuses!:

"I'll do it later," Hiccup whispered because he was aware that Gobber was no longer measuring leather, but staring at him as though he were mad.

"Hiccup..."

"It's not what it looks like!" Hiccup cried, turning back to face his old Master.

"Hiccup—" Gobber repeated as if Hiccup had never spoken, "I think I'm ready to try and find a dragon partner."

Whatever Gobber could have said, this happened to be the last thing Hiccup would have expected. The smile on Hiccup's face could have been likened to an excited twelve-year-old.
"Really?"

"Well I can't just keep using yours to melt their scales," Gobber said. He held up Hiccup's scale vest—*scest*—and twisted it so that the brown fire still warming the hearth reflected majestically off the blue-black body. "Can yeh imagine if every warrior o' Berk had one o' these?"

Hiccup rolled his eyes but his smile remained.

"Figures. Some people want to use dragons to conquer lands or to fly or just to look good...you want to melt scales."

Gobber sniffed and thumbed his nose. "Don't even pretend you're of a different cut."

"I'm in it for the flying," Hiccup defended. "And maybe to look good. The forge benefits were just a pleasant surprise."

::*You're in it for the esteem of being seen next to me and don't you dare say any different:*::

Toothless was obviously still sore with him.

"Wouldn't dream of it," his human returned.

Gobber looked from Hiccup to Toothless with an arched brow. He must have transcended into an age where he knew better than to torture himself over figuring out *that* particular relationship.

The shine of Framherja called out to him from its rest against the forge wall...as she always did. Every day he saw that bow he would ask after it, and every day he would be rebuffed. It was the one thing he could not help but push at when given the chance.

"Was it a gold dragon that she was made of?"

Hiccup followed Gobber's line of sight. He spared Framherja a quick glance and snatched the *save* from Gobber in the man's distraction. He set to cutting along Gobber's faint marks in the leather himself.

"I told you—I didn't make it. And it wasn't dragon made either—" *Framherja was the daughter to Mjöllnir, made out of a weapon's spark.* "Neither of us had any part of it."

Hiccup lost focus on what he was doing because as he said it he suddenly felt, in some roundabout way, that they were responsible for acquiring her. It was their actions, their decisions—after all—which led them to one another.

"Well when will we see it in action?" Gobber griped. He appeared cross, sorely looking at the golden temptation but knowing how adamant Hiccup was about not touching it. "There are bets flying around in everything. Lost twelve penningar when you didn't use it in the first raid you were present for."

"That should teach you against betting," Hiccup admonished lightly.

Gobber snorted. "I take it betting wasn't one of the dirty habits you picked up out there?"

Startled, Hiccup looked up from his project.

"I picked up no dirty habits!"

"Ha!" Gobber roared with braids swinging. "A man who carries around *that* much drink certainly
has his fair share of dirty habits—"

"I have good taste!"

"'And if I know you—which I do—the only reason you didn't take up betting is because you'd never take the chance tae part with anything of value—"

"I'm... fiscally intelligent!"

"A greedy ickle whelp, more like."

"Words cannot describe how offended I am right now."

"Man's gotta know his own weaknesses."

"I'm not speaking to you."

"Denial looks good on no one."

"Shut up."

::Toothless! Toothless! Toothless! TOOTHLESS!::

Toothless huffed, upending much dust from a rarely cleaned floor, and pushed his torso off the ground. He turned to the wide window of the shop with earfins flat against his head to show his distaste for such attention seeking. Already he was annoyed with his human; the Basic Brown diving towards them did not help his temper.

::What?:: he said with a growl lingering in his throat. Though it was low enough to go unnoticed by the whiskered Smith, Hiccup casually looked up from the worktable.

::Vikings!:: the Brown howled in the undertones of her roar. She gathered the attention of humans milling in sight outside. ::Vikings took them—they took the others and chained them and put them on their flightless carrier! They are going to Her!::

Toothless had turned away from the Brown before she even finished relaying her message and jumped to his feet.

::Hiccup!:: he snapped. ::Vikings took dragons from Safe Island::

The save hit the leather with a dull thud as Hiccup's hand went slack.

"Wait...wait what?"

"Hiccup...?" The laughter from their earlier bantering had died from Gobber's face at Hiccup's alarm.

::They're going to Her—the demon—they're using the Freed to find their way to her::

"Who?"

::It is the new Vikings. The fresh ones with the strange symbols on their fronts!:: The Brown provided from the other side of the window.

::The guest-drove:: Toothless relayed.

Hiccup swore so loudly that Gobber jumped. Thuggory looked too gleeful at hearing of the dragon's
ability to find the nest over humans. He would only see the victory in such a plan...not the long-term benefits of uniting humans and dragons.

"Of course!" he hissed to himself, furious that he had given so much trust. "Of course they did! Why didn't I foresee—?"

::Should we get your sire?::

Hiccup snapped out of his frustrated mumbling.

"We don't have time...we have to go. Gobber, get my dad—call an emergency meeting. Toothless —!"

Toothless was already at the door, waiting for Hiccup to throw on the saddle.

"Hiccup—," Gobber gasped, trying to make sense of the coded events. He reached out to the boy who had already started working on the buckles of his gear. "Wait! What's goin' on?"

Hiccup jumped into the saddle, out of Gobber's grasp.

"Tell dad that the Meathead clan may be heading to the nest now," he called over his shoulder. "I'm going to check—!"

That's all Gobber heard before Hiccup and Toothless took off into the sky, sending up loosely packed dirt to billow out from their launching point.

Chapter End Notes

So let me know what you think. From Astrid's theory on the scar to the Meathead's behavior to Stoick and Hiccup's talk. Now we're getting closer to the final showdown!
Damned

Chapter Summary

Hiccup and Toothless face off against the Demon

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Damned

"Those slug-munching, worm-trousered, cot-fouling, thrice-damned—!"

Not even the wind could drown out the curses shouted into Hiccup's ears.

"Astrid..."

"I am going to break their knees backwards with the handle of my axe!" Astrid swore. "I'm going to geld each and every one of them so that no woman will ever have to suffer their children, and I'll rid the world of their arrogant, insufferable—"

"Astrid," Hiccup said again with a measured calm. "You are hurting me."

The deadly grip she had on his sides barely lessened.

"Trust me—I'm restraining myself as much as I can," she said with dark promise.

Hiccup took that as an apology and focused flying due east.

The silence lasted only a moment before Astrid lost her cool again.

"Argh!" she screamed in his ear. "The nerve—!"

"Save it for the Meatheads, will you?" Hiccup snapped. He had been trying to keep a level head himself, but Astrid's insistence on expressing her rage over the situation fed his ire. Of all the dragons the Meatheads had captured—hers was the only bonded to be taken.

The Meatheads had quite a bit in store for them when they caught up to their ships.

Upon discovering their treachery, Hiccup wasted as little time as possible before he gave pursuit. He first went to the Safe Island to check out the veracity of the Brown's message. Indeed, a number of the dragons were missing. Some were even injured—probably those that fought back. Worst yet, Hiccup didn't know how many of the missing dragons had fled at the aggression and how many were captured. Of those missing was Chip, and with Chip went Astrid's composure, for she knew he would not willingly abandon her.

Hiccup glanced down at his sides where only the white knuckles of Astrid's fingers could be seen, the tips buried into his vest with her clawed grip. The only barrier between them was Astrid's saddle, which was held fast between their torsos. Astrid had every intention of riding her dragon after she
When Hiccup returned to Berk, a loose damage assessment in his mind, Stoick was waiting. Together, father and son constructed a quick, and rather substandard, rescue mission as Hiccup suited up in his vest and mask. Time was wasted in deciding which riders would go on dragon back—Hiccup tried to express the dangers of flying dragons with unsolidified bonds into the Control. He tried to explain the poisonous mists and the power of the Demon they would be battling, but no rider would relent. In the end he had to enlist in his father to finalize his decision; every breath he wasted in arguing was time lost to the Meatheads.

Those flying would follow Hiccup to head off the Meatheads—it would slow Hiccup down immensely, but the head start the Meatheads already had could prove to be disastrous. Should they make it back into the Demon's control the captured dragons could turn on them as well. Hiccup needed support over speed.

Tuffnut, Snotlout and Speedifist followed him—Ruffnut was too fresh with her Puffnadder, and Wartihog couldn't yet fly straight on his Gronkle. Behind Snotlout, also riding the Monstrous Nightmare he named Mongrel, was Fishlegs, who's Basic Brown was too small to carry him. Astrid insisted Fishlegs stay with them—that his knowledge was invaluable—and Hiccup found he had to agree. He only remembered things he wrote down or experienced, but anything unknown to him was just that—unknown. And Hiccup had a feeling he would need just as much knowledge as support.

Hiccup's father sailed in their wake a ways back, burdening Berk's fastest ship with her best warriors. Stoick was nearly as furious as Astrid and Hiccup when he first heard of the Meathead's actions against them, though for a different reason entirely—he felt slighted that the Meatheads would pull something like this under Berk's hospitality.

"Mogadon wouldn't have done this!" Stoick had roared during their brief debate on what to do.

Hiccup thought Mogadon would have done this. He thought just about any other Viking clan would have when shown the prospect of dragon aids without easing into it slowly enough—including Berk.

Hiccup knew this was his fault. They had gone too fast with introducing dragons as companions; he had gotten too excited and trusted too quickly. Berk's cooperation had heartened him so much that he neglected to calculate the initial reactions he was never present for. He forgot about the letters—the first of which were sent back when he was with the Magyars—and the subsequent denial that surely followed.

::Wings!:: Toothless announced to the brooding boy.

Hiccup squinted against the thick air. It was cloudy and dim—moments from rain going by the heavy wetness in the air—and he feared he would not be able to tell where the poison started in these conditions.

"Where?" Hiccup asked.

::It's almost in your vision::

Nearly as soon as Toothless said it Hiccup caught sight of the wide, square sail—the Meathead sigil of a cleaved dragon stark against its white like a bloodstain.

It weaved between rock stacks characteristic to the Nest's barrier.

"Shit!" Hiccup hissed. His fingers tightened around Framherja's grip. He could feel her hum against...
his palm, feeding off his anger.

"What is it?" Astrid asked.

She eyed the weapon lain across the saddle, just touching the bend of Hiccup's thighs; Hiccup carried it before him so that she could ride passenger without getting hurt. That was his reasoning anyway. A reasoning that piqued her curiosity. But now was not the time to inquire after his weapon. Nor was it the time to confront him on her theory of his scar.

"They're heading into the poison," Hiccup said roughly.

Astrid peered ahead, quickly spotting their target only to have it disappear behind the clouded shadow of a stone tower.

"We're going to have to follow them," Hiccup went on. "Try not to breathe in too much of the air."

Astrid turned in her seat and called back as loudly as she dared, "Poison air! Be careful!"

A ways back Speedifist nodded; Astrid saw him turn to relay the message to Snotlout and Fishlegs and she faced forward once more.

"Hold on," Hiccup murmured as a last warning. Astrid felt him lean forward as Toothless pulled in his wings—perfect sync. She mimicked Hiccup's movements as they dove closer to the water.

Already the heaviness of the air lessened.

"Is it less concentrated down here?" she whispered.

"Mostly, yeah."

But not enough.

They spun and twisted through shadow and rock; it was through her work with Chip that Astrid endured the precarious maneuvers. She trusted Hiccup and Toothless to sense the materializing stacks that seemed to sneak up on them in the thickness of the fog.

"They're getting too far in," Hiccup decided when he caught sight of the sail once more. They were closer, at least, and gaining on the Meatheads fast.

He lifted Framherja from his lap.

"Look out," Hiccup said to her. "We may be boarding a ship that's on fire."

"What?" Astrid asked, nonplussed. Hiccup ignored her.

::: We're already well into her Control. Be careful:::
"I'm always careful," Hiccup mumbled as he drew the string tight.

Astrid leaned back, curious and weary. Hiccup had no arrows but he seemed confident in using the weapon. The senselessness of this alone put her on edge.

"What are you...?" she started to ask, but her voice died in her throat.

Light had appeared between the rest and the nocking point of the bow—bright and blinding and thinning into a line of pure, screaming energy.

"What is that?" one of the guys wailed behind her. Framherja must have looked like a shining star in the haze to them. The light crackled and spit; Astrid was sure she would be burned should she move so much as a hair's breadth closer.

Hiccup released the string before the Meatheads could turn another corner. Lighting cut through the dim atmosphere and erupted against the mast.

Astrid yelped a swear just as the sail went ablaze. She leaned as far away from Hiccup as she could until she practically lay against Toothless' rump.

"What was that?" she cried when her voice came back to her. Her chest moved in her fright, gasping in more air than she should have; her wide eyes riveted on the bow; her heart pounded against the hollow of her throat.

"Calm down!" Hiccup barked. He was too focused on stopping the Meatheads to deal with their reactions—understandable though they may be.

Astrid pulled a hand from her chest; it must have leapt to her heart in her startle.

"I am calm," she vented. "But that's not...that wasn't a weapon—!"
"Relax."

"Don't-don't tell me to...! I am relaxed—*shut up!*"

Hiccup could hear Snotlout's profanities behind him and Speedifist howling his cheers. Just barely audible beneath their hubbub was Fishlegs rattling off all the reasons of why that arrow should have been *impossible.*

"Where did you get that?" Astrid demanded. She knew more about the wielding of weapons than forging them, but she also knew the limitations of mankind and the materials at their disposal.

"Not now, Astrid," Hiccup said shortly. The cries of the Meatheads quickly drowned out those of his peers as they came upon the longship. The blaze had spread from the sail to its post, worming its way down to the hull of the ship. This was wrong. There were some powers that men weren't meant to handle.

"Later, we are going to talk," Astrid promised to his ear. "But—hey, where's Chip?"

They were upon the ship now, but it wasn't the one that Thuggory sailed to Berk on. Though still of Meathead build, this ship was wider with too many men were on it, screaming and cursing and scrambling with buckets of water for the fire. The appearance of Toothless and his passengers agitated them further.

"*Night Fury!*"

"*It's the outlaw—they're riding it!*"

"Get the weapons!"

Vikings threw open their sea chests to pull out bolas and axes; spears were snatched from underfoot and swords unsheathed. Metal clanking against metal ricocheted off an invisible hem of rocks, charging the air with bloodlust.

"Where's Thuggory?" Hiccup yelled down over the points of fingers and blades alike.

"Farther ahead!" one man volunteered. He must have been the appointed captain of the ship, because no one else offered to talk; he had a tall, menacing look about him that chased from Hiccup's mind any thoughts of landing on the boat.

"And the dragons they have with them?" Hiccup asked with forbearance. "What happened to them?"

He received blank stares as an answer.

"What dragons?" asked a different man.

"The ones *stolen* from our island," Astrid spat. Hiccup could feel the grip back on his side; she had gotten over her mistrust of him in her rage.

Hiccup knew the Vikings' surprise to be genuine by their faces. Vikings weren't exactly good actors.

"We're just following their trail!" the pseudo captain hollered back. He pointed to one of the rock stacks—one close enough to be seen through the mists—where a red mark stained the porous face. "They called for backup. Said they found the Nest. We're just following orders!"

With a grim set to his face, Hiccup looked into the dense fog and knew they would have to venture further in to find Thuggory. Then he looked behind him, to where the rest of their team proceeded to
catch up.

He turned back to the captain and said in an abrupt manner, "Turn back."

The man looked ready to laugh.

"I should think not!" he cried and many of his fellows rose to join. They came for glory and victory — no outlaw would deny them this honor.

Hiccup's patience had reached its end as the gravity of the situation continued to fester. Faster than anyone could react, Hiccup drew Framherja once more and shot a bolt at the stern.

Wood and fire exploded on deck. The hull had been pierced; water sloshed into the longship's belly.

"Freya above," Astrid swore softly.

The Meatheads howled in outrage. The flames they once focused on smothering reached out to the fresh blaze. There was no way to extinguish the fire girding the clinker oak. The ship would sink.

Men began to abandon ship, jumping into the ominous calm of the waters below. These were dangerous seas and Odin knew what dragon or serpents skulked within. Even so, Hiccup knew their safest option was to go no further.

Seeing as they refused heed his warnings, Hiccup felt he had no choice but to relieve them of deciding for themselves.

Already, they had journeyed too far.

Thuggory—if he had any concern for his men at all—would have to turn back for them.

"DUDE!"

Tuffnut's voice startled both humans atop the Night Fury.

"How are you guys doing?" Hiccup called back to the arriving riders, easily ignoring the assault of cussing from below.

He could see their faces now—his former peers. Their eyes bulging at Framherja, at the men escaping the flames, at Framherja again...

"I...I did not see that coming," Snotlout admitted. His focus lay solely on the bow in Hiccup's grip.

"It shouldn't be possible," Fishlegs murmured from behind the future chief. Dubiety read deep in his frown.

"I don't understand—how did you do that?" Speedifist asked in such a rushed, breathless manner that it were a miracle Hiccup could understand him at all.

"Man—" Tuffnut huffed. "Tell me the lands you got that in. Just tell me. I'll be there."

Much like the disagreement of the Meatheads, Hiccup had no time for twenty questions.

"She's going to retaliate," he said shortly and sharply. "Any minute now that demon is going to send them out after us—the dragons—to collect us and drop us into her mouth. And there's going to be so many that we can't possibly survive." Their eyes had flickered to Hiccup's face possibly once and returned to Framherja, but Hiccup knew they listened. "Follow as far as you as you trust, but if your
dragons start to fight, you turn around. Do not force them to continue. You'll damn the both of you."

"And what do we do if that happens?" Fishlegs asked as he managed to move his scrutiny to Hiccup.

Hiccup ran a tongue across his lips and glanced, anxiously, at the miasma.

"If anything? Stay with our ship when it gets here and protect it from the dragons."

"What about you?" Snotlout asked.

"We'll rescue the dragons and come right back," Hiccup assured him.

"And I'm not coming back without Chip," Astrid promised. She felt nearly as energetic as Framherja
and Hiccup could only imagine the sort of impatience she must have felt in that moment, wanting to
get to Chip as soon as possible while at the mercy of someone else's speed.

"You cannot leave us here to drown!"

Hiccup sent the treading captain a flat look.

"A rescue ship is coming. Until then I suggest you watch out for sharks."

Then he dove into obscurity, Astrid against his back, and Tuffnut and Speedifists' guffaws lingering
in his ears.

A heavier pressure at his left side told Hiccup that Astrid was leaning away from Framherja as best
she could without losing security. The girl didn't like surprises and she didn't like the unknown.

"How you doing, bud?" Hiccup asked Toothless in a murmur. The dragon had been unusually quiet
and dour in his presence.

::I'm not sure:: Toothless replied, honest and soft. ::I just have a bad feeling....::

Hiccup could pick up this feeling as well—like some deeper, ancestral terror had seeded in his chest.

The noxious cloud around them stung their skin in its coldness. Hiccup kept low to the water as
much as possible but its viscosity grew nonetheless.

Astrid coughed, the noise so untowardly human in the atmosphere that Hiccup started.

"Are you—"

"I'm fine," she grunted.

With one hand, Hiccup unfastened the mouth filter's buckle from his face. He faced some difficulty;
the leather was new and stiff, and required more concentration than he felt he had.

"Here." He held the piece over his shoulder.

"I'm not taking—" Astrid coughed again.

"I'll take it back later, but I'm at least accustomed to this."

Already his throat felt heavy and burdened but he steeled his composure for a strong front. He hoped
she couldn't feel the shake of his frame as the proximity of the Nest brought on shivers.

"Fine," she mumbled and Hiccup felt the mask leave his hand.
"Are they following?" he asked. She didn't need to wonder who he referred to.

"I can't see."

Nor could Hiccup. The mists had thickened into a dank cloud.

::They've stopped:: Toothless stated for his humans' benefit. ::It's too strong::

"And we're getting too close," Hiccup whispered. His insides were a ball of nerves.

"Is it really so bad?" Astrid asked.

Hiccup suspected her mind now fell to her axe, stimulated with the thought of a fight. Astrid had peculiar tendencies, and Hiccup did not know her enough before she met Chip to say if they were a recent development or not. She seemed less stable without Chip; on Chip she kept a more level head. But without him, as Fishlegs once warned him, she had berserker penchants.

Toothless jerked up, lurching Hiccup's stomach and causing Astrid to gasp and grab hold of him with both arms.

The ship came upon them from the mists so quickly that Hiccup had nearly flown into it. Only Toothless' acute senses saved them from collision.

Hiccup's apprehension at the depth in which they had ventured eased, for there were the dragons—four of them, chained in pillory.

"Chip!" Astrid cried the second she spotted the Timberjack.

"Thuggory!" Hiccup snapped in a voice that was not his own. Thuggory looked up, hardly surprised as though expecting him.

"Thought you'd come," Thuggory grinned. The gap-toothed smile spiked Hiccup's ire.

"Clear out!" Hiccup snapped just as Toothless fired a bolt of cerulean plasma.

The men in its path scattered—the blue fire sailed just above the deck and hit a dangerously close rock stack. Fragments of stone showered the ship. The boys swooped down in a follow up maneuver and landed on the freshly cleared area.

Astrid was off the dragon before Toothless had all four paws on the deck. The mask and the saddle clinked against the ground as she sprinted towards Chip.

As the first to gather his wits, Thuggory took an aggressive step forward.

"Now wait just a—"

Astrid's fist cracked against his jaw. She moved so fast that the large man hardly saw the swing coming, and the power behind her arm was completely unexpected. For all his broadness, Thuggory stumbled backwards under the blow, mouth bloodied. Astrid was on the move again without ever losing her stride.

Other men moved in to intercept her, weapons materializing in their hands and faces set with menace.

Hiccup leapt from the saddle with Framherja's string already drawn.
"STOP!" he commanded.

The men listened to him, if only out of curiosity. Astrid could ignore the phenomenon of Framherja, both for having seen it before and for having greater concerns to occupy her mind. The Meatheads, on the other hand, saw a glow emitting from Hiccup's weapon and heard the hiss of a power formerly reserved for the skies.

Hiccup fired anyway. Lightning hit the chains holding down a Dimbrusier. The dragon shrieked nearly as loud as the surrounding men did from the impact and lingering fires. The damaged chains gave way to its frantic struggles and the dragon took off without a spare thought to its aid.

Only...not toward the Nest, where Hiccup had half-expected it to head. It flew west—towards freedom.

A deeper part of Hiccup desperately wanted to follow it with his eyes, to figure it out how it had overridden the pull of the Demon when, to his knowledge, it had never bonded with a human before. But he couldn't. He was too energized, too pressured in the moment. He had to take this one step at a time while still taking into account the big picture.

He kept his focus on Thuggory—the boy's jaw had dropped and a gurgled noise bubbled from his throat in the absence of words. No one dared approach them now. Not with Hiccup causing fires as readily as any dragon and not with a snarling Night Fury on the ship.

For one tense moment, Hiccup and Thuggory stared at one another. Thuggory's lip curled. The side of his face throbbed from the girl's blow.

"Stop her!" He barked, pointing a finger at Astrid.

Hiccup had Framherja drawn again, this time aimed at Thuggory. None of the men moved.

"I'd leave her alone, if I were you," he said in a voice more lighthearted than he thought himself capable of. Framherja hummed, warming his cheek with her arrow. "Instead...why don't you tell me what the Hel you were thinking?"

"Is that all of them?"

Ack grunted at the question, his nod barely perceivable under his multi-braided beard.

It was enough for Stoick.

"Onward men!" he commanded to his Berkian crew. Those who weren't holding the soaked Meatheads at blade-point jumped to the oars.

"Oi!" snarled Shrewberry the Shellshocked, the Meathead Thuggory enlisted in leading his support mission. "What's the point of sinking our ship if we're just going to go on anyway?"

"Control," Stoick answered in a response very much like one his son would give. He continued to the bow of the ship so he could get the best view of these red markers Snotlout informed them of.

"Should we continue further?" Gobber asked uncertainly at his side. They had never pierced this far
into Helheim's gate before. Gobber's stumps ached from the biting cold and the oncoming storm. "We're undermanned—and we have them to look after now. How can we fight dragons and watch over 'em?"

Phlegma padded up to Stoick's other side as quietly as a woman of her size could.

"This was supposed to be a quick retrieval mission," she reminded the man. "I suspect your son is right when he says 'we ain't ready'. He's been right a lot as of late."

"Then we'll never be ready," Stoick returned calmly.

Phlegma and Gobber shared a look behind Stoick's back.

"You don't know that," Gobber began. "Hiccup seems to have a long-term plan in mind—"

"This so-called demon will keep getting' stronger," Stoick interjected. Phlegma opened her mouth and the chief quickly added, "We're here now and we can lose more men in the next raid than we can afford. Tactically...I think we need to keep pushing forward."

The blonde pursed her lips.

"Call it women's intuition if you must, but I have a feeling we're sailing straight into Hel itself."

"We don't have a full fleet on our hands," Gobber added.

Stoick acknowledged all of this. "Aye, but don't forget, we have them for some extra blades."

He gestured to the shivering Vikings grouped against the rail of the ship.

"We won't help you," sneered a nameless Meathead who was close enough to overhear their conversation.

"Yes, you will," Stoick said darkly, never turning around. He lifted his eyes to the Nightmare flying lazy circles overhead. The sight of that scarlet, talon-laden beast still made his heart lurch out of habit. "What say you, boys?"

"Slowpoke and I are totally ready," Speedifist trumpeted as he zoomed across the length of the ship.

"I think we can go further," said Snotlout. "What do ya say, Mongrel?"

The Nightmare rumbled his consent.

"Good!" Stoick barked. "Heads up, now! Catch together men—"

"Hiccup...Hiccup didn't want us to follow them," Fishlegs shyly interposed.

Phlegma nodded at the large youth, crossing her arms.

"Then maybe, given Hiccup's recent expertise on this matter, we should respect his wishes," she said to the Chief.

"The Hel we are!"

Aksel Hofferson's bold announcement broke through the privacy of the conversation. The man stormed the length of the ship toward Stoick and jabbed a stubby finger in their current direction. "That boy of yours has my daughter in there with him! I don't care if I have to swim in these damn
waters—I'm going after her!"

"Stoick..." Stoick turned to Spitelout, who had taken seating on the other end of the ship. His brother appeared every bit as troubled as Aksel. "Sto'...I can't, in good conscious, let children fight this battle for us."

Phlegma closed her eyes so that she wouldn't have to see Stoick nodding his accord. She worried for the children as much as anyone, but this was a fool's errand.

"And our dragons aren't pulled into the control yet," Snotlout added. He expressed the point casually, but something in the words caused Fishlegs to narrow his eyes.

"You know," the heavier man said, "I think we might actually have a chance of getting to the Nest if we arrive with the ships."

Snotlout twisted his torso so that he could look Fishlegs in the face. "Say what?"

"What was it Hiccup said?" Fishlegs mumbled to himself. He hardly noticed the stares gathering at his feet. "That there's something about humans that...that buffers her control? Yes...yes... What if it's more than just proximity? What if we gain power in numbers?"

Snotlout rolled his eyes and knocked the other boy on the shoulder.

"That's stupid. Let's leave the hypothesizing to Hiccup."

Stung, Fishlegs glowered at the back of Snotlout's curly-horned helmet.

"Since when do you know that word?" he asked scathingly.

"I learned it from you," Snotlout said brightly. "Did I use it right?"

Fishlegs raised his eyes to the heavens, "Odin help us when you become chief."

"We're moving on," Stoick said, calling for the boys' attention, "regardless if you follow or not."

"Well..." Fishlegs sounded the word on his tongue slowly, making his final decision. "The dragons have shown less signs of losing control than Hiccup led us to believe. I think we can move forward as well, so long as we stay near you."

"I wouldn't want to move forward unless you stayed near us," Stoick admitted dryly. It was the closest he had ever come to confessing weakness.

From further down the ship, Ruffnut bit her lip and glanced at Fidget. The Puffnader—always aware when someone admired her sheen—cocked her head back at her human and bubbled her throat with a croaking burp.

Ruffnut gave Fidget a small smile and rubbed the temporarily expanded hide. She had been adamant that Fidget came along, and it was agreed to so long as the dragon behaved, but Hiccup had insisted she not ride Fidget lest she lose control in flight. Apparently, Ruffnut didn't have the experience Hiccup thought was necessary to make her own judgment calls.

What was worse, he got his father to enforce this decision so that both human and dragon were boat-bound. Ruffnut felt all sorts of irritation toward the Fury Rider at the moment.

"Think you can ride her?" Tuffnut asked. Rippy had perched on the edge of the hull, with his talons drilling into the woodwork for support and Tuffnut balancing at an edge. He had watched his friends
hover over the transfer of the Meatheads, content to let Rippy rest his wings for the moment.

Personally, Tuffnut didn't care what decision the chief came to. So long as Rippy continued to respond to him, he was going in there.

"I can ride if you can," his sister sneered. Tuffnut reined in the impulse to answer her aggression with more aggression.

"It's not like that Ruff, and you know it."

This wasn't about sibling rivalry. They had very different dragons and very different experiences in riding dragons.

"I'd rather you—ugh—didn't," Tumble grunted between pulls of his oar.

Ruffnut turned on him.

"You don't get to make that call!"

The redhead frowned up at her, never losing stride with his fellow oarsmen.

"If that thing loses control—"

"That thing has a name!"

"Right," Tumble blew out, looking to the side. He didn't want to argue. Not in the margins of Helheim's Gate. Not when they were so close to death.

Ruffnut was uncomfortably aware of the nearby Vikings watching them—of her brother watching them. Everyone knew she and Tumble were to be wed in two-weeks time and people still doubted the prosperity of such a match. Ruffnut reckoned they were waiting for her to scare him out of it before the wedding. Sometimes she herself thought he would wake up one morning and see the error in his proposal.

"Look—" Ruffnut began in her coarse voice, but an inhuman scream overpowered whatever she had been ready to say.

The oarsmen stilled, the Meatheads quieted, and the commanders of the ship peered into the white murk with uneasy attention. The call itself was abrupt, but it lingered between the labyrinth of stone, rippling through water and fog to strike their ears and nerves over and over again.

"What," Stoick breathed, "was that?"

Even in the silence of the cry's wake he could feel his body tense.

"I think...I think that was the Demon," Fishlegs proposed.

Gobber looked at his friend and chief.

"Still want to move forward?"


The thousand and one things Hiccup wanted to say to Thuggory blanked from his mind as a bone-chilling sound snaked around them.

*She knows, she's mad, she knows...*

"You need to get your men out of here!" Hiccup rushed. "You are going to die!"

Men began laughing but Hiccup felt no heat for their jeer. Gods above, the shores of the Nest were visible and Hiccup's insides felt as icy as the mists that touched his skin. Hiccup had never approached the Nest from below before—the one and only time he came so near he was flying high, and it was nighttime. He had not known there was a beach to this volcano. He had not known the ships could *moor.*

"You need to get out of here," he said again. "All of you. Thuggory—" A shadow fell over Hiccup's face as he struggled with himself. Now was not the time to shout and swear at the heir. Nor was it the time to smash the handle of his sword into his nose. "...I expected better of you."

"Hiccup—!" Astrid's voice called for Hiccup's consideration. The chains of the Timberjack rattled and Hiccup knew something was wrong, but Thuggory had taken a step forward.

"What else did you think I would do?" Thuggory heckled. "We know where the Nest is, we know how to get there, we know what's in there, thanks to you—"

"You don't know!" Hiccup snapped. He had relaxed his grip on Framherja's draw. The light fizzled out. "You have no idea! You aren't prepared to fight her—none of us are yet. We have to be smart about this because she could *obliterate* us—"

Chip made a racket thrashing against his irons. Hiccup cringed. It seemed too loud for where they were; a red flag waved to an enemy whose notice he wanted to avoid.

"Hiccup!" Astrid cried again. Hiccup saw her pulling on Chip's chains, trying to stay him long enough to free him, but the dragon did not recognize her. He tossed and twisted and screamed with wings bound to his sides to keep him from freeing himself, only seeing Astrid as an enemy. She couldn't risk axing the binds with his struggles endangering him so.

Hiccup felt a muted pain for Astrid. He knew the truth she refused to acknowledge even when it stared her in the face. He knew if he freed Chip the way he freed the Dimbrusier that the Timberjack would leave.

Before he could say as much, Thuggory was in his face once more.

"We are prepared to fight!" The brunette declared. He pounded his chest in standard Viking testimony. "That's what we came for!"

Hiccup ignored the 'Hoorah's!' of Thuggory's allies.

"It's not the fight you think you're getting! You don't understand what she's like," Hiccup warned.

"We are not waiting any longer! No one can wait any longer!" Thuggory shouted back and a few more hearty cheers rose from his men.

Frustrated, Hiccup continued to push his point. "We may have *one shot* to kill this thing—don't waste it on glory!"

"I'd rather waste it on glory than sit around doing nothing!" Thuggory had been making a habit of
raising his voice at the end of his sentences, like he was delivering a motivational speech to his men. And they were eating it up.

"Chip...Chip—stop!"

Astrid continued to try and calm the Timberjack to no avail. The dragon lost more of its reason the closer they drifted to the clearing shores of the Nest. Hiccup cast her a helpless look; the urgency was mounting and he didn't know where he should be directing his attentions.

He sent Thuggory his coldest stare.

"There was a time when you knew when to listen to me," Hiccup said, dark in his deliverance, but fraught.

It worked; whatever Hiccup had been going for had worked because Thuggory seemed to have come out his game of playing war. For the first time since landing on the ship, Thuggory did not look at Hiccup as an intruder or as an obstacle, but as an old acquaintance from summers past.

"We're not kids anymore, Hiccup," Thuggory said in his own, low tones. He was talking to him now—to Hiccup—not to his men. "I'm the leader of my village, and it was my village I was thinking of when I chose to use your information to our benefit."

"You're not thinking long-term enough!" Hiccup expressed. "Thuggory, you have to listen to me on this, I know what I'm talking about."

"Hiccup!" Astrid called to him, frantic in her distress, "What's wrong with him?"

She grabbed for either side of Chip's face, but he kept trying to shake her off. The barbs of his cheeks sliced her palms.

None of the men had thought about trying to interfere—not since Hiccup pulled Framherja on their captain. They continued to watch in bafflement as the Viking warrior insisted on calming a crazed beast.

"She is trying to pull him back into her control," Hiccup told her as evenly as he could. He didn't know how to explain that Chip didn't recognize her anymore; that he had seen the glaze creeping up in those green irises. That she would too, if she cared to look.

Practically, Astrid didn't want to hear it.

"What?" she gasped. "No! Chip! Chip, it's alright—just—!" Chip jerked around so violently that Hiccup feared he might soon hurt himself. "Look at me, Chip. You look at me, now! Hiccup—how do I stop it? We-we weren't together long enough, were we? Is that it?"

Hiccup wasn't sure where to turn. Should he continue to get Thuggory to see reason before the dragons came through? Or should he help Astrid figure out how to calm Chip? She was right in that she had not spent enough time with the Timberjack—as he knew the case would be for the other riders as well. They were too late; Chip was lost to her and Hiccup didn't have the heart to say it out loud.

Hiccup had no idea how much time had passed since he landed on the ship, or how long since he heard that demonic wail carry from the bowels of the mountain. Their entire confrontation thus far felt rushed and fast and nonsensical.

::We're too close:: Toothless breathed. ::Too close now::
It was the despair set in Toothless' moan that snapped Hiccup into action. He pulled Framherja's string yet again to spark another, threatening projection.

"Turn this ship around now or I will sink it like I sunk your last one!" he announced as strongly as he could manage in such a noxious, portentous environment.

Thuggory was silent for a moment, his pronounced brow pinched. He seemed to realize what Hiccup implied of his other men and their absence.

"You'd kill us all?" he whispered. No longer did his men cheer their encouragement of his loud declarations of war. They too came to realize the deeper implications of their absent backup. Their larger weapons were on that ship; their extra men were on that ship.

Astrid's desperation continued to mount in the background.

"Chip—stay still, please!"

"Trust me, drowning would probably be a more merciful death," Hiccup said. His thumb strained against the golden wire.

"I—Hiccup! Tell me how to fix this!"

"Turn around now." His arms shook and he hoped it was only felt and not seen. Had he fired too often?

"I need to—Hiccup? Hiccup why isn't he—?"

With a pained expression, Hiccup gave Astrid back his attention.

"Astrid," he said with all the softness of someone delivering grave news. "I'm sorry—"

"No," Astrid rasped. Her knuckles had gone white in their effort to hold onto the chains securing the wooden ring around Chip's neck.

"I can free him but he won't return to you."

"No," she said again, a strange calm seemed to have settled over her shoulders. The chains fell from her hands.

"Come back to Toothless."

"No!"

Stony faced, bright-eyed, and exhaustingly desperate, Astrid wet her lips, put two fingers in her mouth and blew.

The shock of the whistle's pitch pierced the fog and tension. Chip stilled...along with the rest of the ship. Even Hiccup and Thuggory had taken their focus off one another to stare at the striking move. The sound of lapping water, creaking wood, and bted breath tarried in the backwash.

Hiccup opened his mouth in the tense of saying something—possibly to further apologize to her, possibly to berate her for drawing more attention to them—when, to Hiccup's immense surprise, the Timberjack responded. Chip's pupils slit, his eyes brightened, and he looked at Astrid as though meeting her for the first time all over again.

A dense rush of air fell from Astrid's mouth, weighted by her relief.
"It's me," she said, reaching for him once more.

A Timberjack had no lips, so Hiccup was surprised further when Chip opened his beak as if to roar and a sharp, high-pitched shriek to imitate a human whistle emerged.

Astrid let out a hysterical laugh, and Hiccup thought her eyes looked a bit glassy under the white of the miasma.

"That's my boy," Astrid said in a pleased whisper. She cradled Chip's head with fond hands and brought their crowns very close together. Chip purred as if to say, 'That's my girl'.

Hiccup wanted to smile at their deeper connection, at this step towards progress, but the reality of where they were continued to press in on him in a fatal clamp.

In a flurry of movements, Hiccup drew Framherja and shot the anchor of Chip's chains...then again for a captured Gronkle, and two more for the Zippleback.

The explosive power spooked Chip and the flabbergasted Vikings watching; they were too slow to stop Hiccup and too stunned to rein in the dragons taking flight.

Astrid opened her mouth to reproach the archer—he nearly hit her!—but could only catch the saddle he threw.

"Saddle up!" Hiccup ordered. His legs felt weak and his chest hollow.

Too much. He fired too much.

His voice set off the Vikings. They moved—towards Astrid to keep her from flying off, towards Hiccup in their fury...

Toothless reared up, flaring his impressive, black wingspan, and slammed his paws back on the deck. Simultaneously, and drawing forth an energy he didn't think he had, Hiccup nocked his umpteenth arrow of the day and once again aimed it at Thuggory to further dissuade the Meatheads from taking any action. He didn't care about their mutinous glowers or how uncooperative they were sure to be; his concern for the situation at hand ebbed in favor of the future danger.

The air should not have been so cold—not with the small fires left from his bolts licking the furnished wood and not with the concentrated energy he stressed between his hands. She was coming for sure...

"Take the dragons," Thuggory spat. His features had roughened in his contempt. "We're already here."

"I'm not leaving you here," Hiccup said. He kept darting his gaze to Astrid, willing her to saddle up faster. They had to get in the air before the dragons came, they had to get off this boat and get it moving before it was too late...

"We're not leaving until we end this war once and for all," said Thuggory. Now he was being stubborn, Hiccup knew it.

"Then I will sink this ship," Hiccup promised. "You are all going to die, and you're going to destroy the rest of the Barbaric Archipelagos in the process."

A low rumbling had begun. Or perhaps it had always been there and had only now come to their attention in the quietness following their shouting. Hiccup did not need to guess at the source of this
"Fantastic," he growled.

::They are coming:: Toothless needlessly informed him. His jawfins and earfins drooped, but the Night Fury kept up his grim determination. He was prepared to fly into the oncoming storm.

"They're coming," Hiccup relayed. He looked at Astrid as he said this. She nodded stiffly, tightened a final saddle strap, and leapt upon Chip's back. The dragon crooned at her familiar weight; Hiccup had a feeling the Timberjack would never again fall under the control of the Demon.

Thuggory straightened. "We're fighting."

"You're leaving," Hiccup rejoined.

Cracks upon cracks were heard overlaying that subterranean thunder. The ocean seemed to shiver around the ship. Meatheads began muttering to one another, squinting at their surroundings.

A 'swing' sliced through the air as Chip and Astrid took off and Hiccup felt some of that condensed tension in his chest loosen; they were one less thing for him to worry about on his endless list of concern.

He took the opportunity to lower his bow. Energy returned to him—energy he hadn't realized he needed—yet it still didn't feel like enough.

"We're going to have to defend ourselves anyway," Thuggory said in a raised voice to counter the noise closing in on them.

Hiccup snorted.

"Defend yourself as you leave," he snapped. He was wholly fed up with wasting his time on this. Thuggory had no backup and yet he still refused to turn around for pride. He was going to die—Hooligans were going to die—

Hiccup shook his head and forced his concentration on something more productive than anger and despair. He took a calming breath for good measure, picked his mask up from the ground, and mounted Toothless without sparing Thuggory another glance.

The Night Fury was sprung for action with his toxic gaze fixated on the scarcely visible volcano wall.

Thuggory bristled at Hiccup's dismissive tone.

"You do not tell me or my men what to do—this is my ship—"

"This is my territory!" Hiccup barked back. "If you try and turn back now we'll stay to cover you. I'm trying to save you, now go—!"

Toothless didn't wait for Hiccup's body to give the command. He shot up, forcing Hiccup's foot to move with the action.

::They're here—she's near::

"We have this," Hiccup whispered. "We can do this—"

Chip and Astrid were at his side in an instant. It could have been the rapid crescendo of thunder
rising from the earth that made their sudden proximity so startling, but Hiccup nearly dropped the mask in
his fastening.

"That goes for you too Astrid," he said, his frown taut.

Astrid scowled. "I'm not leaving you!"

"Yes you are," Hiccup huffed as the flapping of wings grew louder and louder. "We rescued the
dragons, at least. This is their choice. You need to go back and defend the others—"

The bawls of innumerable dragons drowned out all other noise. The very air seemed to shake as
waves upon waves of winged reptiles disgorged from the volcano's vent. They descended from the
mists—wings and fire and color, screams and howls and belching roars. The mountain shed scabs of
stone the size of Knórr, sending boulders bouncing down the slope walls and bestrewing the tumult
with reverberating cracks.

The furious shouts of blood-crazed Vikings rose up to first greet the Demon's army. The Meatheads
were ready to die fighting, even if it meant losing a significant portion of their clan's voices.

Toothless and Hiccup shot forward to meet the swarm faster than Astrid had ever seen them move
before. She lingered at their backs, momentarily conflicted on whether to obey Hiccup or not.

She knew she couldn't keep up with them. Not to mention Chip's bout of insanity had shaken her
confidence. Hiccup's behavior had disturbed her even more. She felt like he wasn't even present for
half of this journey, dismissive and distracted and ever troubled. He and Toothless were acting
skittish. This wasn't like before the raid, where Hiccup was calm and firm and confident in his flying
capabilities. He had the behavior of a man who accepted that death was coming, and it scared her. It
made her question how sound his judgment would be working under such fear.

This wasn't one of the clear-cut, black-and-white, do-or-don't situations she was used to; there was
no obvious right or wrong course of action. There was only action itself and an inconceivable array
of possible consequences for any she should choose.

Astrid inhaled deeply, drawing in poison and composure all at once.

"Let's go!" she barked. Chip arced and dropped. Astrid would trust Hiccup to keep the dragons off
their back for just a while longer.

The pair twisted perpendicular to the water, sweeping in so close to the Meathead's ship that men
blundered. At the last instant Chip leveled off and sheered the beakhead clear off the bow.

"Damn it!" Thuggory cursed. "You crazy b—"

"Turn back!" Astrid demanded. She knew she couldn't destroy their means of escaping—not this
deep into the Nest. She and Chip dove again, this time aiming to cut a small tear in the sail as another
warning. "You don't have the weapons to fight them all!"

Thuggory had to have known this; the bulk of his supply was on his following ship—their catapults
and oils and extra hands.

"It's too late!" he snapped. His grip was tight on his sword; he could recognize the severity of their
situation.

"You can still get out of this!" Astrid hollered. "Turn! Back!"
Up above Hiccup and Toothless continued to buffer the dragons as best as they could. At first they attempted to lure the army from the ship, but the dragons seemed to have specific instructions: eliminate the humans. They would gladly attack Hiccup, but not chase.

In unison, Toothless and Hiccup fired at the most concentrated areas, doing their best to set the dragons off track. They weren't teasing the horde this time, safe in their speed and agility. Like his fight with Snotlout, Hiccup was forced into a confined area. But he couldn't leave them. His gut wrenched at the thought of leaving humans to the mercy of the Demon, thickheaded though they may be in their ignorance.

Toothless correctly read Hiccup's reluctance at abandoning the Meatheads.

::We can't keep fighting until those humans leave!::

However, it seemed they would soon be unable to leave while under attack themselves. Their window to do so had left them as dragons began to close in with greater abundance. They still poured from the Nest, seemingly without end.

"Are you suggesting we abandon them—?"

Pain bloomed against Hiccup's thigh. A very dull-scaled Timberjack managed to cut in too close. A moment later and the beast screamed, sent careening downward from a very over-powered fireball to the stomach courtesy of Toothless.

"Don't waste your fire—" Hiccup grunted with the effort of backhanding a Bullrrougher with Framherja's upper limb. The shock she sent through it stunned its wings out of function and it plummeted into the watery mists.

::Don't bleed on—me!:: Toothless countered and he hurtled them into a dizzying downward spin to narrowly avoid the incoming claws and flames.

They arced and curved in their dance of evasion, both dragon and human trying to remain conscious of the power they exerted into physical attack. Exhilarated and terrified, Hiccup felt he had spades of energy behind Framherja—the lightning she produced proved immensely effective against the hides of dragons. While not burning them outright, the electrical pulses could incapacitate them.

Hiccup tried to keep a steady read on their surroundings but the immediate danger posed to their persons quickly wiped the thought of saving the Meatheads from his priorities. Their defense had turned into frantic survival; he and Toothless were losing energy and he had no idea how much longer they could hold out. Time seemed lost to him, but even Hiccup started to notice the space in which they fought for seemed to shrink.

"We're—" Hiccup gasped and lurched away from the elongated claws of a Grimler, "we can't—"

::We need to get out of here!:: Toothless snarled. ::Forget the humans!::

But the dragon knew that even if they were to abandon the stupid Vikings, they were far too lost in the throngs of the Demon's army. They were tired and weakened, putting all their effort into saving beings that didn't deserve to be saved. Escaping would require aid they didn't have.

"I know!" Hiccup returned with a similar aggravation to his voice.

He flipped them belly up in the air, pulled Framherja's string, and fired above his head from their upside-down position. The lightning rocketed downward and struck the back of a purpled Nightmare, sending it crashing onto the deck of the Meathead's ship in a boneless heap.
The drain was becoming more noticeable with every bolt he loosed.

::Hiccup!::

The boys righted in time for three different shades of fire to blaze over Hiccup's head. Startled, Hiccup looked up to see the descending barrage of dragons scatter and fall with the power of the joint attack.

His head whipped to the source.

"What the—?"

"Need help?" Speedifist called, streaking past in the wake of the fires. Hiccup stared at him for a moment, dumbfounded, and then blankly turned to see Snotlout—Fishlegs on board—Tuffnut, and Ruffnut following suit.

"What are you doing here?" Hiccup gasped. He wanted to rage at them for putting themselves and their dragons in danger, but words failed him.

"Helping you of course!" Snotlout boasted. Mongrel shot a jet of stunning orange fire in an arc around them, sending more dragons squawking back.

"But..."

Ruffnut wasn't ready...Tuffnut and Snotlout shouldn't have gotten so close...

How were they this close?

::It's...it's okay...:: Toothless said. He sounded as if he suffered from the same sort of wonder as Hiccup.

"Hiccup!" Astrid cried—her face shiny with ash and sweat like she just spent a day in the forge. "Hiccup look!"

His first impulse was to look down. Rock stacks had been knocked down, creating a dam of stone to keep the Vikings from sailing that last half-vika to shore. The front end of Thuggory's ship was crushed.

With a start, Hiccup realized his father's vessel was there as well, docked next to the remains of the Meathead's last ship and pulling their crew aboard. Around them, bodies and broken weapons rocked with the pulsing waves.

It should have been a slow, dangerous process of transferring men from ship and water while under fire...which was what caught Hiccup's attention next.

There was no fire.

Save for the lingering flames dotting driftwood and sails, no dragons attacked.

With wide, disbelieving eyes, Hiccup turned his focus to the multitude of tails disappearing into the clouds.

The dragons were retreating—and not towards the Nest, as Hiccup expected, but towards freedom.

"What...?"
He looked helplessly at Astrid and the other riders, but they were cheering alongside the Vikings below, slapping backs and giving high-fives.

::Merciful Ea...!: Toothless sounded choked with awe. ::I would never have believe it if I didn't see it right now...::

"What?" Hiccup hissed, shaking his head. "Believe what? What is going on?"

::It's such a high concentration of humans that...that it's working against her...ha...Ha HA! There are forces we cannot see or sense at work, but it's working!::

Toothless had gained volume with his excitement, and he ended his evaluation with a loud, draconic whoop. Hiccup was too confused to feel fully ready to celebrate just yet.

"The human minds...?" Hiccup mumbled. Then dawning arrived. "So, you're saying...this many humans around the dragons shook her control off of them? But...no. No, what about the raids? Surely there were more people then—?"

::So many humans close to her:: Toothless corrected, still sounding as if he could scarcely believe it himself. ::Your minds...your minds in unison broke her control at the heart of it::

Hiccup finally allowed himself to smile. An odd sort of pride he hadn't felt in ages soaked through to his core—a very human pride.

"See?" he teased. "We're more than just faulty mammals."

Toothless snorted a weak wisp of smoke from each nostril. His igniting chamber ached from the earlier strain. It would be best if he resisted firing for a while.

::Well, bringing this many humans to her...that was risky::

"We didn't do it on purpose," Hiccup pointed out.

::But when are our victories ever on purpose::

Hiccup laughed; the same slightly hysterical kind Astrid had when Chip returned to her. The danger was still present—they were still at the Nest—but their good fortune was nearly palpable, acting as a healing ointment to the terror he experienced just moments before.

Toothless shook his head as he surveyed the Vikings far below.

::I knew humans had underlying powers of their own...but they're so subtle. We would never see your kind as a threat because you are incapable of offensive magicks. To think your breed is capable of an influence reaching this magnitude...::

"Well I won't explain it to them," Hiccup said, also watching the celebrating Vikings. The Meatheads would face serious charges when they were back in clear waters, but for now the victory in their survival sustained a truce. "It's probably safer to just let them think they scared the dragons off with their charming, Viking demeanor rather than...what is it exactly?"

::I don't know:: Toothless huffed. ::Your admittedly impressive mental capacity::

Hiccup laughed again, still breathless. His mouth felt moist from the ragged gasps trapped within his mask; his head felt light and stuffy. The poison seemed to have cleared slightly from the activity of a thousand wings circling. Or perhaps, like the control, the proximity of so many humans somehow
drove it away.

::Are you okay?: Toothless asked, belatedly.

"Fine," Hiccup stated, nonplussed. He blinked at his right hand, where Framherja was gripped, warm against the frozen air. He hadn't realized how much energy he put into using her and it wasn't until now—now that the rush of battle started to recede—did he feel the drain once more.

He looked way from the last of the fleeing dragons to the top of Toothless's head.

"You?"

::Fine::

"Hiccup!" Fishlegs called from Mongrel's back. The Nightmare rose in altitude to hover at his side. "Hiccup we did it!"

"You didn't do much," Snotlout corrected. "You just tried to crack my ribs as I was kicking ass."

Fishlegs appeared most offended.

"I hit one in the face with my hand!"

"How are they?" Hiccup interjected. He gestured to the several dozen non-riders that survived the short tussle with the Demon's army.

"Well enough. We had some losses ourselves...but mostly Meatheads before we got here," Snotlout reported.

Hiccup nodded, having expected as much. A rather self-important smirk came across Snotlout's face.

"Of course," he continued, "if it were anyone but Vikings fighting down there, there wouldn't be much left."

Behind him, Fishlegs rolled his eyes.

"We did manage miraculously well, given the odds," the blonde admitted. "But this was something that should have been avoided all together..."

"Hey—" Hiccup jerked at Astrid's softly spoken word. Chip swung down to poise at Hiccup's other side so that he and Astrid faced each other at a diagonal. She was grinning.

"You're bleeding," Astrid mentioned casually.

Hiccup blinked and followed her line of sight to his upper arm—a part unprotected by Fury armor—to see a wide tear in his sleeve and jagged flesh beneath. Weird, he couldn't feel anything yet. His leg throbbed, however; a steady spread of darkness moved across the material of his pants.

He looked back at her and said, "You're burned."

Her smile turned rueful and she wiped some hair out of her eyes. Her arm was dark and blistered, her wraps half unraveled. On her forehead, cutting into her eyebrow, was another stark burn.

"They'll turn into pretty good scars," she said casually.

Toothless' ears perked up.
"You should get those treated now," said Hiccup, seriously. He had too much experience with burns to leave them unattended.

He would have said as much too, had something not pounded against his ears. Hiccup stood to attention much as Toothless had just done.

A thud. Hiccup swore he just heard a thud. Like the first beat of a thunderclap, the first beat of a war drum...

"I will," Astrid assured him with a bit of exasperation to her tone. "Don't worry about it. So, do you know why they left?"

"Huh?" Hiccup spared her a distracted glance before squinting back at the Nest. Some more of the fog had cleared...the rocks looked to be rattling again...

"Why they left?" Astrid repeated. "The dragons? It couldn't have been our 'awesome fighting' no matter what Snotlout says, because even I could see we were losing."

::She's coming!::

"She's—"

Return! RETURN! RETURN MY FLEET!

Hiccup felt as though he couldn't comprehend this fast enough. An awful sort of panic seized him.

SPINELESS WORMS! YOUR LOATH DECEIT!

Everything was okay a moment ago and now her voice—her voice was drumming in his ears—

The thuds grew louder...more frequent...

"GET BACK!" Hiccup bellowed down to the Vikings below.

The riders turned to him first, Astrid naught a faðmr away looking on in shocked concern.

"—What?"

"Hiccup—!"

"Get back!" Hiccup shouted again, and this time the Vikings started to pay him attention. He looked to Astrid, "She's coming. The Demon's coming and you need to get them out of there now!"

Astrid nodded—no questioning, no asking for elaboration. She and Chip dived to the ships.

"You need to leave!" Hiccup could hear her saying. "We need to get out of here!"

"What is it?" Tuffnut asked.

More fragments of rocks—ranging from as small as a pebble to as large as a horse—began to skitter down, shaken free from a power within. The continuous patters sounded like the first wave of rain in a coming monsoon.

A PASSION, HUMAN, BURNS AND BLIGHTS!

"Go—" Hiccup said desperately to the twins, "Go! Help them get out of here!"
"But—"

YOUR UGLY HEARTS, YOUR WRONGS AND RIGHTS!

It was worse than the oncoming dragons—the noise, the terrible, terrible noise—

"Go!"

The top of the volcano exploded—an ash cloud of concentrated, choking poison erupted from its mouth, preceding the Demon herself.

Her great, horrible head shattered through the summit of the Nest and knocked down the rock walls like a hatchling breaking from its shell.

Hiccup was only slightly more prepared than the others, but never had he seen more than the scale of her mouth in a shadowed cavern. She was gargantuan—all jaw and teeth and too many eyes.

"Beard of Thor..." Snotlout breathed.

"GO NOW!" Hiccup roared downward. The Vikings were scrambling, screaming, fighting to get onto Stoick's ship.

The mountain gave way a little further as she pressed her weight on the edge with a five-digit paw.

RETURN! The Demon screamed hoarsely within a most ghastly roar to the clouds. Her jowls shook. RETURN! RETURN!

"Cover them!" Hiccup ordered the riders over the din of panicking humans. "Fishlegs—" with Toothless cooperation he swept in to Mongrel's side. "What can you tell me about her?"

"Small eyes!" Fishlegs yelped. His voice cracked. "It relies on hearing and smell! Likely has little agility—shape of its crown implies thick bone—hard to penetrate, but weak skinned going by wear and decay of the hide. Un-undersized wings—flying is not a strength—but strong."

"Chances of defeating her?" Hiccup thought he might try.

Fishlegs calmed his nervous stutter to give Hiccup an unappreciative look.

"I'm not answering that."

YOU WILL SUFFER! The Demon screamed with a mighty inhale. YOU WILL BURN!

Hiccup felt his stomach drop. The poison in the air appeared to swirl around her oversized muzzle and pull into her throat to feed heat brewing within.

"SCATTER!" Snotlout howled, figuring the same thing as Hiccup.

Her next scream came with the most powerful jet of fire Hiccup ever had the misfortune to witness. He could not watch—the heat was too awful and burned his eyes and skin, even when he rose far beyond its danger—but he could hear. He heard the swearing and anguish of Vikings abandoning ship, the splashes of bodies hitting water and the pops of the woodwork exploding.

Hiccup pulled away the arm he used to protect his face, his throat sour with sick.

"DAD!" he cried. He was hardly aware of the riders shouting their own torment. There was too much smoke and fire to see anything specific—too many bodies to be counted, too many bobbing,
Viking-less helmets dotting the waters.

The Demon released a dark and cruel laugh every bit as appalling as her presence. Hiccup knew he could not have been the only human hearing—it was too loud and too terrible to go unnoticed.

**CRY YOUR TEARS, YOUR HUMAN WOES!**

**CURSE YOURSELF, THIS PATH YOU CHOSE!**

But the other humans were busy crying out in the burning waters, screaming for one another and fighting to stay alive. None gave any inclination to hearing anything supernatural.

**YOUR LORDS, YOUR RICHES, YOUR WRETCHED WHIMS...**

**YOUR PROGRESS SOARS, YOUR FUTURE DIMS...**

The Demon sounded gleeful with her sinister vengeance. Hiccup felt rage seethe inside of him—an ugly, sweet sensation—and his own need for revenge rejuvenated his fatigue.

*His father was on that ship—his mentor and his friends—*

Hardly aware of his own actions, he aimed Framherja, pulled her string, and fired from stores he believed to be long since depleted.

**WRETCH!**

The Demon bellowed in pain and was forced to swallow her second buildup of heat. Her head snapped to the side where Hiccup could see one of her three right eyes clenched shut and leaking blood.

The other two narrowed on Toothless' dark wings. Gigantic, gaping nostrils flared.

**A PLAYFUL RIDER, HAVE WE HERE? YOU AIM TO DIE? TO JOIN THOSE DEAR?**

The Demon bared her teeth—all seventy of them—and a persimmon glow flickered to life beyond her tongue once more.

Hiccup followed Toothless' cue to make a sudden, steep climb, half reading his thoughts, half trusting blindly.

::**SHE! Weak—WEAK now! Now! The humans! Her host lost!**:: Toothless began to shout in a long, wavering growl as they moved.

Despite himself, Hiccup had to stare at the back of his best friend's head. An out-of-place apprehension took hold of him because, for the first time in years, Hiccup could barely understand Toothless.

"Toothless..." he whispered in uncertainty.

What had happened? Was the bond slipping? Had he done something...? Did he unwittingly choose humans over Toothless when he insisted they stay to defend the Meatheads?

So lost in this ill-timed concern, Hiccup barely noticed how high they climbed or hardly questioned why the moved so far from the ships and the Demon.
Behind him, a great shuddering breath could be heard. Hiccup could almost feel the air sucking them back into the accursed jowls. He risked a peek behind him. The Demon had her maw reared and opened, and directed at them.

They weren't moving from her line of fire.

For one breath longer Hiccup agonized over Toothless' lack of response to him.

They breached the thick of the clouds, the Demon temporarily disappearing from sight. And it was then, when Hiccup's fingers tightened over the leather of the saddle and his leg throbbed from the sting of the wind, that he felt it. Much like his first months under Toothless' watch, Hiccup sensed what the dragon wanted him to understand.

Trust in me, Hiccup.

The words rushed over him in lieu of the wind, which had let up as they came to a suspended halt in their rise.

::ATTACK!:: Toothless bellowed in a prehistoric roar. There was something ancient and multilayered to a voice Hiccup once thought he knew. Had he not been riding Toothless himself, the human would have sworn that it was a thousand Night Furies crying for support and not one.

"Toothless? What—?"

Hiccup sucked in a breath.

Dragons began emerging from the clouds—the very clouds they had once escaped into. Diving, all of them, with wings drawn in tight and their mouths open for over a dozen budding flames.

A wild smile came to Hiccup's face as he helped Toothless fall into a missile of their own.

"COME ON!"

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What is he doing?" Astrid gasped when Hiccup and Toothless suddenly shot up and away from the Nest, much like the dragons who were recently freed. The boys traveled high in the opposite direction of the Demon until the clouds obscured them from view.

"We should get out of here too," Tuffnut said gravely.

"No!" Astrid snarled. Her father was on that ship—in the water—so was their chief. Ruffnut was down there searching for Tumble and Snotlout nearly fell off of Mongrel trying to ensure his father was alive. She watched as the Demon opened its jaws impossibly wide—the glow of death burgeoning in its throat.

Despairingly, she looked at the water, at the dozens—hundreds—of bodies fighting against tide and flame. Time and sound escaped her for a moment as her eyes searched the mass of writhing arms and heads.

They couldn't be dead. She refused to believe it—

A high scream pierced the air.
The riders all looked up—willing to look at anything but the Demon and its unstoppable warpath. The Night Fury had returned, Hiccup aboard, and barely a tailspan behind them must have been thirty dragons thought to have been well out of reach by now.

Astrid heard Speedifist's gasp.

"Are they returning to her?"

"Maybe they got him," Tuffnut mumbled. "She could be controlling Hiccup too—"

But both theories fell through when the Demon opened her mouth wider yet as though to swallow the small rabble, and the dragons continued on their course with unwavering determination.

"They're going to fly into her fire!"

"He'll get killed!"

"No!" Fishlegs cry was the loudest, and yet, the least despairing. "No—he wouldn't—!"

Astrid didn't need to ask. The dragons swooped and each and every one released their fire into the Demon's mouth an instant before it could discharge its own. Reds and oranges, blues and purples, long and thin and fat and round, fire of every texture unionized in the very crux, beating the release of the Demon's stream by a hair's breadth.

At the forefront of this motley volley was a streak of lightning and an orb of azure. No Viking could quite tell what happened next, because a blinding explosion of unmatched proportions set off inside the Demon. A gale exploded outward, throwing men back in the water, practically snuffing out the flames that ate at their vessels.

"YEAH!" Hiccup crowed with his fists in the air. His ears were left ringing and his body suffocated under the overwhelming heat. Momentarily senseless, the rider could not tell how many of the dragons escaped or if they weren't quite fast enough. He didn't know if the surviving Vikings joined him in his applaud, or if they watched at all. He didn't know if any were alive to watch.

It was with this thought in mind that Hiccup welcomed the screams of the Demon. He suffered the firestorm's unbearable brightness and could just make out—through the flames surging from her pores and the smoke mushrooming over the mouth of the volcano—black talons tearing through the stone lip as the hellish creature as the fell back into the depths of her aerie.

FEED ME MY OWN FIRE, WILL YOU?

::She's not dead:: Toothless warned. Hiccup could fully understand him once more, taking some alarm out of the statement.

A HOLLOW VICTORY, WITHOUT ADO...

The disembodied voice had gurgled and faded in its deliverance. She was dying.

"But she will be—ack!" Hiccup's arm nearly wrenched from its socket when Framherja tugged backwards. "Wha—?"

He tightened his hold on her to keep the bow from flying off. Her grip had become unbearably hot against his palm, soaking through his scraces so readily that she may have turned them back into
"Framherja!" Hiccup bit out against the sharp pain. "What are you—?"

**FOLLOW ME, MAN AND BEAST,**

**FOLLOW ME WHERE I SHALL FEAST!**

::We're going after her::

Startled, Hiccup stared down at the Night Fury.

"Toothless—"

::She will never be this weak again, Hiccup:: Toothless grunted. ::You know this::

The only reason Hiccup didn't resist Toothless' change in direction was to lessen Framherja's insistent pull. He escaped certain death more times than he cared to acknowledge that day and still the weapon was not satisfied.

"We're pushing our luck," Hiccup griped. "We should go back to the ship and see who's injured."

::Do you really want to simply trust that she's dead? This may be our only opportunity to make sure she is not coming back. We have to press our advantage now!::

Hiccup couldn't respond. The explosion had passed but too much heat and smoke polluted the air above the volcano—air they had just flown into. He had his eyes closed and all his concentration on tucking in against the heat as much as possible, still clinging to Framherja with stubborn determination.

::She ruined my life:: Toothless added.

The Night Fury was getting worked up. Hiccup could feel the energy from Toothless' indignation and, amazingly, it seemed to feed into Framherja as if Hiccup were nothing more than a conduit between the two. She agreed with Toothless, pulling Hiccup's torso forward as she demanded they follow the Demon's fall.

Framherja wanted them to finish the Demon too—Hiccup could read that much from her. And if Framherja wanted this then so did the gods.

Hiccup relented silently, still attempting to mute every flooded sense of his but sound. Framherja must have picked up on his agreement because her abuse to his arm lessened significantly. Toothless must have as well because Hiccup sensed something very gracious in his projected 'Thanks'.

Together, they dove.

Once again, Hiccup was left at the discretion of Toothless' judgment. The Demon left in her wake a thick, noxious trail of black smoke that Hiccup had to hold his breath through. He was a victim to sensation. He felt like they were freefalling and he pressed against Toothless' back as tightly as he could.

**FORTY SPANS BELOW YOU BURN!**

Her voice grew in volume as they closed in on their destination—wherever that may be. Sweat soaked Hiccup's tunic, his own body heat trapped beneath his screst in the sweltering pit.
Hiccup knew when the setting changed. It was abrupt. The air had shifted, the temperature switching in extremes, and the human risked squinting through his lashes to see blackness stills surrounded him.

But it wasn't smoke.

Hiccup opened his eyes fully, trying to adjust to this vacuum of light. They were still moving downwards. The air still stung his face; it bit his cheeks and nose with chill.

Where was the fire? And the miasma and the smoke?

"Are we—" he choked a bit sheer acerbity of the cold. "Did we go to the same nest?"

His voice echoed to indicate that there were walls of some kind.

::Yes:: Toothless said, though there was a bit of uncertainty to his own insistence.

"Huh..." Hiccup distinctly remembered the Demon's roost as being fiery and hot.

::It was as I expected at first, but then...I don't know what happened. We could never pass this far down before:: Toothless said.

"You couldn't?"

::Not that we'd want to, but...::

Framherja's heat contrasted so strongly with the new atmosphere that her presence seemed to scream at him.

"It's her," Hiccup said. "Framherja—she's bringing us down."

The darkness ended. It came so fast that both of the boys were wholly unprepared for the light that struck them.

Hiccup's eyes felt as though they were pushed back into his skull from the harsh exposure. He brought a hand up and blinked the spots from his vision, desperately trying to inspect his surroundings.

"What is this...?" The words fell from Hiccup's mouth in puffs of air. He watched his breath curl out before him with the same sort of wary that channeled through his veins.

It was freezing—freezing—for falling into the depth of a volcano. Hiccup knew without having to question the matter that they were not, in fact, in the volcano. It was impossible, for they were now in an underground world—a world of mist and ice and rock, and miles and miles of cold.

Something crawled along his skin, bubbled within the hollow of his lungs. Something wrong and powerful.

Framherja shook in his hold, and much like he could occasionally understand Toothless on a deep, indescribable level, he felt a word pass through his mind that was not of his doing.

Niflheim.

He stared, blank-faced, at the weapon. Questioning. Denying.
Then he looked back out over the valleys of the unnatural—rôsts beneath the world as he knew it.

It stifled him—both the disbelief and the simple acceptance.

"Thor almighty, we aren't in Midgard anymore," Hiccup whispered. Goose pimples rode up his flesh and every hair on his arm stretched beneath his scraces. "We...we're in... Oh Gods...! Toothless, she really is a demon, isn't she?"

A demon straight from Niflheim. A...a Jötunn?

::*I don't care where she's from:*: The slight to Toothless' pride rang in his ears much as the explosion. It pushed his blood and aroused his resolve.::*I care where she ends*:

Hiccup swallowed down something he humorlessly dubbed as homesickness.

"Where is she?" he whispered. Though the air was thick with miasma and this world riddled with obstacles, nothing could explain a creature of such enormity disappearing.

::*She's here...she came down here. I'm sure of it*:

They flew around in a cautious circle, squinting against the cold prickling the moisture of their eyes and straining their senses.

Hiccup could hear a profound silence underlying the echoes of what sounded like fluid.

"What's down there?" he asked.

::*Not her*:: Toothless grumbled. But he lowered for his human's curiosity.::*It's...it's a liquid. See? Water*:

The brume tempered as they neared and, sure enough, the calm, frosted plane of water came into focus. Hiccup leaned over to get a better look at their reflection. The undisturbed surface gave him a perfect mirror image of Toothless' belly and his own, pale face peaking over.

"Water...? Down here?"

And it wasn't just a puddle; the entire floor of this world consisted of water. No flat patch of rock protruded—not in his immediate vision, anyway.

Hiccup had only just begun to comprehend how water got down here, and how much of it, for the matter—*other than this* truly being Niflheim—when he saw eyes staring up at him.

Eyes that were not his own.
Horror seized his heart with a barbed grip, so sudden and tight he wanted to retch, but Toothless' calm kept him from crying out.

::It's a dragon:: Toothless said to quiet him. ::It's already dead::

"A dragon?" Hiccup repeated under his breath.

Despite his scare, Hiccup urged Toothless to get closer. He looked for the eyes again and found one pair...then another, and another, and another...

Watching them from beneath the water was not just one dragon, but thousands. More than dragons; Hiccup saw cows, sheep, sharks, whales, dogs...millions of creatures trapped in suspension, their lifeless bodies preserved in the terrible cold...

The only thing that could disrupt Hiccup's riveted perturbation was the sensation of a blade piercing his foot. The pain shocked him horribly—so much so that he yelped, jerking. Toothless wrenched them up and away from the water.

::What is it? Are you okay?::

"Yeah..." Hiccup squinted at his foot and experimentally tried to move his toes within his boot. He couldn't feel them, it was so cold, but he could see weak movement beneath the skin of his frost-covered shoes.

His next shock came from an appalling crack. Hiccup twisted in the saddle to see the scale coating of the tailfin now had a large fissure running through it.

"Damn!"

Hiccup kicked the tailfin into first gear to pull them away from the baleful sea.

Grim, Toothless said, ::It was that water. There's something very unnatural about it::

"Everything about this place is unnatural," Hiccup griped. He squinted back at the thick coating of fog blanketing water—a water so cold that anything approaching it would ice over, and so dense that
it could keep bodies from floating to the surface..."How could water be this cold and not freeze...?"

::It doesn't matter:: Toothless said impatiently. ::I think...I think that is the food we were bringing
her...she didn't even eat most of it...:::

Hiccup was still stuck on the water.

"If we are in Niflheim, then..." He racked his mind for old teachings. "A spring...a...a boiling
spring..."

::Focus Hiccup! Forget the water, we have to find her!::

"I'm sorry," Hiccup said with just as much agitation. "It's not everyday I fall into another world!"

::She's here...::: Toothless hissed.

Hiccup's breath stilled.

"Where—?" he whispered.

::I can sense her...she's dying...:::

"Right," Hiccup muttered with a mutinous look at his bow. "If she is dying then why even come
down here?"

A TASK, I'VE SEEN! YOUR OPEN MINDS!

Her voice came from everywhere—and everywhere was everywhere. Endless belts of rock and
cloud surrounded them. Hiccup tried his damndest to pinpoint where she spoke from but his
heartbeat thudded annoyingly loud in his ears and his breathing came in a heavy, audible tide.

WEIGHTED DOWN BY DUTY'S BINDS!

::::Over there!:::

Toothless spun them and shot a plasma bolt into a crevice of deep fog.

The heat highlighted the vapors curling around every rock, dispersed the clouds with a very odd,
rippling effect and, for a moment, the air had cleared.

"Gods—" Hiccup swallowed.

Neither male looked in the direction of Toothless' flame as they should have done. They stared,
instead, into the temporarily unclouded ether, at the crannies and clefts of the endless walls.

They stared at hundreds upon hundreds of identical, smooth stones. Ovular and shining.

::Eggs...::: Toothless croaked. ::She's breeding:::

"Of course..." Hiccup couldn't breathe. The sight to him was horrifying—straight out of his
nightmares. He didn't have to wonder whose eggs they were. He didn't want to wonder what would
happen when they hatched. "She's—all the food—and when they hatch—when they hatch we'll be
—"

::MOVE!::
Monstrous jaws extended from the darkness, miasma spilling between conical teeth. Hiccup reacted as quickly as Toothless. They darted out of the way and the Demon clamped on nothing but frosted air.

**THY LINE IS DRAWN, THY SENTENCE SET!**

The Demon screeched, pushing off stone towers. She had smoke and blood flying from her mouth as she gave chase. Her skin was blistered and her wings torn, but she came after them with the power of a juggernaut. The eggs rattled on their shelves from the clout of her flings.

**THIS RECKLESS QUEST, YOUR LAST REGRET!**

She snapped and snapped at them, swinging her clubbed tail when they ventured too far from her to keep them from escaping. The boys were sluggish in their usually fantastic agility; they started to cut closer to her attacks with every dodge.

**A GIFT A CURSE, IT MATTERS NOT! THIS IGNORANCE SHALL EARN YOUR SPOT—**

"She moves pretty fast for her size—" Hiccup snarled. She slammed a huge claw down on them and their atomity alone saved them in slipping through her fingers.

**AMONG THE SHRIVELED AND THE DAMNED—**

::*I know. Got a plan?::*

**A SLUMBER DEEP YOU REAP IN HAND!**

"Might," Hiccup said shortly. "Have any fire left?"

::*Hardly—::* Toothless grunted. ::It won't make a difference on her—::*

"It's not for her."

His arms felt weak and numb; Hiccup feared he would let go of Framherja and not realize until she was beyond saving. But survival coursed strongly in his blood, and from his heart his anger called for justice—justice for the millions of lives ruined at her cruelty, anger for his father—

Hiccup's heel slammed into third. They twisted from the mercy of the Demon's jaws yet again—her putrid breath curling in their lungs—and together rocketed towards the cavernous breach where she once hid.

She seemed to take great delight in their maneuver of trapping themselves.

**POWDERED BONES AND BLOOD CONGEALED—**

"Aim with me—" Hiccup whispered.

Every fin on Toothless' had pressed flat against his skull.

**LAST BETOLD WHO MOANED AND SQUEALED!**

::*Okay::*

They fired in concert, each weak with their final shot but both combining into a sputtering, thriving
blaze of white-blue.

NO! NO! NO! NO!

The spindling orb slammed into a blue-speckled pearl the size of a human house.

::UP!:: Toothless roared, but even the terrifying cry of a Night Fury was silenced in the detonation of their doing.

Hiccup could hear a series of explosions follow—heat over heat climbed up the towers of rock, reaching for them, clawing at their backs. Hiccup made himself as flat as he possibly could, willing Toothless to climb faster. Flames rushed upward. The infinite popping stormed behind him and Hiccup swore he could hear the screams of demons as well—unborn demons, perhaps—unwittingly killing each other as each ignited gas chamber set another off.

"Go," he whispered, "Go—"

Fire filled his nose and mouth, through his mask—scorching his throat, choking—

NO! NO! NO! NO!

The Demon's voice was frightfully loud. She was right behind them—Hiccup knew it. He could feel her fury and smell her fetid breath.

NO! NO! NO! NO!

Her voice grew louder, chasing them up—a horrific mixture of heat and cold bloomed after them with flaming hands and icy claws. Grasping—trying to pull them down—

Hiccup didn't know where they were, if they crossed over back into Midgard or if they were still caught in Niflheim. They could have been caught in between—in the Nest that held so many dragons prisoner.

Worse yet, didn't know where she was. He could hear her screaming incoherently as though about to swallow them, but he could hardly see his own hand when he squinted against the blistering toxins.

Up, up they went, Toothless beating his wings frantically, climbing as fast as he could into an obscure cloud of smoke and poison. There was no end to it, no end to the fever and death grappling for their lives. Hiccup couldn't breathe. He'd never taste fresh air again. If she didn't kill them, then the fire surely would. The poison would—

Then something snapped. Hiccup's stomach clenched from the twinge across his chest, and he felt the only welcome warmth leave him.

"No—" he gasped. Hiccup leaned back and reached with a bone-weary arm for Framherja, her broken string flickering in the air as if to wave goodbye.

The shift of weight came too sudden and strained the already damaged equipment. Two more snaps of cable were Hiccup's only warning before the cruel hand of fate pushed him from his seat.

::HICCUP!::

It was the worst sensation Toothless could ever recall experiencing—worse than their first test flight, when that human boy who he had grown quite fond of had fallen, worse than the metal contraption which wrapped around his wings, and far, far worse than feeling his fin ripping from his tail as he
was trawled through a forest.

::Hiccup! HICCUP—NO!::

For such a rushed escape, Hiccup strangely felt like he had all the time in the world to watch Toothless' body fall away. He observed the transition of shock to horror in Toothless' eyes. He saw the dragon struggle to twist in the air, the unmanned tailfin flapping uselessly against the vortex of savage winds.

Don't, Toothless, he wanted to say, but the exhaustion of overusing Framherja struck him hard and Hiccup found he couldn't do much more than watch. It brought on a calm and welcomed detachment. Idly, Hiccup wondered if he were actually falling this fast, or if it was the rushing fire which made it seem so.

He continued to plummet...into the volcano or into the water or even into Vinland—he had no idea how far they made it in the first place. The only thing Hiccup knew was that Toothless wouldn't make it to him in time. The dragon should have been focusing on saving himself at this point...

Blackness threatened Hiccup's conscious. He didn't know if he was passing out or if something great and dark were swallowing him, but it spread, tunneling his vision until he could only see Toothless' frightened eyes...

...and fire and smoke...

...and a final gleam of gargantuan teeth before the darkness devoured him.

Chapter End Notes

*Art by Bloodmoon14

**Mongrel is the name Snotlout chose for his Nightmare. It's funny because, to a Viking like Snotlout it sounds scary and badass, but it actually means 'mutt', which could slight the pride of a dragon such as the older, composed, and decidedly pure-blooded Nightmare.
Atoned

Chapter Summary

In the aftermath of the Nest Battle, choices are made. Hiccup is a Hero, and it's not a title he wants.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Atoned

Thunder rolled across sable skies—deep, almost warm in its rumble, like a promise to settle the fire with rain.

Toothless cared nothing for the flames dotting the sea and land. He did not care about how many human lives were lost or how many dragons perished in the explosion. For a single, detached moment, Toothless could feel nothing but pain; he only knew that his body hurt, his head hurt, and his tail hurt.

Another sensation prickled to life. Wetness lapped at his belly and legs, and Toothless was reminded of the harsh landing against rock imbedded shores—a landing that left him stunned and dazed in shallow waters.

A low moan trundled from his throat as his conscious continued its recuperation.

The sky cracked overhead, the heavens opened, and rain fell. Droplets struck Toothless' eyes repeatedly; he blinked and squinted as he dragged his body from the shallow waters. It took a surprisingly long time to cover the short distance to land. The water felt thick around his tired legs and his body demanded that he rest.

Another heart-wrenching groan moved his throat.

*His boy...*

Awareness came more quickly. Toothless hastened his limp onto land, pulling together his bearings and memories.

Dozens of faceless Vikings stood before him. They watched him, watched the sea, blood and tear streaked faces turned toward the carnage. They searched as Toothless searched—without actually seeing anything, their minds blotting out the wreckage for their hearts' sake and their eyes seeking familiar faces.

Toothless saw Hiccup's sire; the man was soaked and stained, cut and burned, with blood to darken his beard. He stared at Toothless in horror, probably expecting his son to be with the Night Fury.

But Toothless didn't have Hiccup—a fact he was all too aware of.

Against his agony, the dragon limped toward the cluster of humans. The fire-forger and the female stood out to him, the bonded dragons and the alpha youngling and the large intellect all distinctive.
But no Hiccup.

Mumbles in Hiccup's language arose from the crowd.

"Where is he?"

"I don't understand—"

"There's no way, it can't be—"

::Where's Hiccup?::: Toothless barked at them. ::Where is he?:::

The stupid humans could not understand him. Vexed, Toothless turned to the silent stone flue from which smoke continued to billow.

::Hiccup!:: he called, begging the landmark for an answer. ::Hiccup!::

Toothless sniffed and sniffed, his nose moving from ground to air, and warbled out his human's name again and again—but Hiccup was not among them.

"Toothless—Toothless, stop—he's not here—he's not..." Astrid had tears in her eyes. She looked as lost as he felt but she couldn't understand—none of them could.

::HICCUP! You answer me right now!::: Toothless tried to roar. It sounded more like a whimper.

"Toothless please," Astrid begged. She acted as though he were making the truth more difficult to accept.

Hiccup was alive. Toothless would know if he were dead. He just had to find him.

The Night Fury swallowed the dense air and suddenly found it hard to breathe. His throat ached from the movement—he overworked his chamber and his fireholes were raw. He felt as if he wouldn't be able to breath flame for days.

Where was Hiccup last? Toothless asked himself. He closed his eyes and thought—because Hiccup did the same thing when he thought—and Toothless quickly found the lack of visual stimulus helpful in dredging up those final moments before he struck ground.

...A different pressure against his shoulders. Lighter. Hiccup fell. He hadn't realized, even after the snaps of that human fastener...

A very odd feeling came over Toothless as he remembered—like he himself was falling. Anxiety, mingled with hope, filled his breast and tingled his limbs, heightened to the point where he could uncomfortably feel it. Toothless didn't know if he felt such a potent combination because of all the humans that currently surrounded him, or because of his time with Hiccup.

...Not until the weight had left him, a part of himself gone, did Toothless know something as wrong...

Toothless' earfins flicked towards the sea, picking up signals his mind had yet to follow.

...The mouth rose from the tract of smoke, every bit as horrible as Toothless remembered, and took him. It took Hiccup. It took him...

He turned to the darkened water. His nostrils flared. The blackness beneath pitched.

...a stupendous crash of water...
Water bubbled, crusted with salt and blood.

It emerged.

Ichorous water cascaded down curved horns and virecent scales, rolled down the twin, ribbed crests stippled in dark bone and dribbled along the ridge of sunken, clouded eyes. The long face of a prehistoric serpent rose from the water.

Vikings screamed to their gods and scrambled back. They grabbed for their injured and reached for half-useless weapons as the mammoth snout slithered onto dry land.

Toothless stayed. The fetid scent of eel never registered to the Night Fury, nor did centuries of instincts demanding that he fight or flee. Instead, he limped forward. Humans called to him, begged him to take leave, yet he continued. Toothless approached a time-old enemy simply because something entrenched in his nerves urged him to do so. Something he knew he could trust over logic or ancestry.

His faith was soon rewarded. For when the sea serpent opened its mouth, on its tongue lay the still and very-human form of a boy.

A weak, unintelligible noise tore from Toothless and he limped faster against reason to the mighty jaw. The sea serpent's tongue snaked from its cavern, moving the body between upstanding tusks without effort, and gently deposited Hiccup on the pebbled shore.

"Hiccup!" Stoick roared, and a number of similar gasps bloomed from the survivors. Much as Toothless had done, Stoick ignored every vibe from his body that bid for him to get away. He ran, limping horribly on a bum leg, and skidded to his knees by his son's side.

"Hiccup!" he whispered again. Stoick's hands went to Hiccup's cheeks, then his neck, and over his mouth, checking for air. The shallow puffs touched his palms like reassuring kisses. Hiccup unconsciously flinched at the touch, bringing more relief to the onlookers than he'd ever know.

"He's alive!" Stoick cried for the benefit of his tribe. "He's alive!"

No words could have been sweeter to Toothless' ears. He knew it, of course—he'd always know when it came to Hiccup—but hearing it spoken in Hiccup's native tongue made it more real.

Toothless lifted his gaze to the sea serpent. It had retreated back into the water until only its bony crest and eyes were visible. The Night Fury nodded; the gratitude he felt in that moment could never be expressed into words. A simple gesture was all he felt capable of.

Perhaps, because of this speechless show of thanks, the sea serpent did not reply in like. It returned to its home in silence, staring at Toothless with a milky focus until it fully disappeared into the abyss.

Hiccup coughed and took a shuddering breath.

"Son!" Stoick cried, delighted.

"Toothless—?" Hiccup moaned out. His voice was so quiet, so weak, yet managed to shock anyone within earshot. "—Where—?"

Toothless pushed Stoick's hand aside, nearly knocking the man on his backside in his effort to seize Hiccup's attention.

::I'm right here, I'm here:: Toothless hushed, all the while cursing this horrid, human frailty that
plagued his boy. It wasn't the sopping, torn clothes, or the slight abrasions decorating any exposed skin; Hiccup was so wet and so pale. Deathly pale, with blue tinted lips and frosted tips to his splayed hair.

...Did humans normally look this pale?

Hiccup's eyes never opened, but he smiled.

"We did it," he whispered no louder than a breath. A hand lifted; fingers as white as the bed of pebbles he lay on reached toward his dragon's face. Toothless touched his nose to the icy tips; he found the absolute chill of them shocking.

::We did it:: he confirmed.

"Hmmm..." Hiccup continued to smile, even as his conscious fled. Despite his paleness and the lines taking his mouth and brow, he seemed years younger. A great burden had been lifted from his soul, a freedom they never thought they would achieve.

Exhaustion settled in on Toothless as well. All the energy keeping him conscious went into ensuring Hiccup's welfare. Now that he knew his boy to be alive and in good hands, Toothless saw no reason to force his body to keep moving.

The exaggerated sound of spitting caught the very dregs of his attention. The last thing Toothless saw was the bow flying from the water as though launched by an invisible force. It landed, upper limb deep in the sand, by Hiccup's side with a dull color and no string between stave and nock.

But there was still life in it, just like there was life in Hiccup.

Toothless allowed his head to rest on Hiccup's chest. He trusted the humans to take things from here. It was the least they could do.

Stoick the Vast sat back on his haunches. His eyes fell to the bow; Snotlout warned him off this bow, as had the Speedifist boy. It was something to be concerned about—both its powers and how it fell into Hiccup's possession—but his curiosity over it was passing and he quickly returned to staring at Hiccup.
In his mind raged a number of things: ponderings on the sort of trouble Hiccup had gotten himself into, on his suspected involvement in things men had no business involving themselves in, on his services to the village, his complete redemption, on his heroics...his son...heroics...

Nothing could be answered now, of course; Hiccup's fleeting moment of consciousness was spent blind to his father's presence.

Someone in the back was telling the Riders to fly to Berk for rescue ships. Someone else was ordering a headcount, while another voice demanded they start treating wounds. Stoick kept his back to it all, to his responsibility. He chose to stare at the slight rise and fall of Hiccup's chest, his living son, and the dragon's head that moved with it.

"...Stoick!"

Stoick jumped. He followed the hand on his shoulder—a hand he hadn't felt—to see Gobber looking down on him in concern.

"You alright?" the smith asked. It was hard not to notice how unfocused Stoick appeared or how dispirited he looked for a man who just found his son alive after a death stunt.

"Aye," the chief responded. He blinked tightly and gave a slight shake of his head. "Aye, aye—this is great. Fantastic. But that—that—"

"Let us have a look at 'em, make sure they're alright," Gobber cut in. "We'll worry about all that sea serpent nonsense later."

"Aye," Stoick mumbled. His son needed medical attention—they all did.

He stood, stepped back, and allowed Gobber and Phlegma to begin an assessment of Hiccup's condition. Fishlegs hurried over as well, opting to stay with those marooned rather than follow the other Riders to Berk, and began checking over the dragon.

Stoick noticed that all three of them seemed reluctant to separate Hiccup and the beast. They worked around the dragon head for as long as they could, Fishlegs avoided moving Toothless until absolutely necessary. Stoick heard Phlegma say something about needing blankets or extra clothing, but Ringworm had just passed by, barely able to walk and supported between two badly burned men. Stoick looked, finally, at what had become of the survivors and saw the call for structure.

Now was not the time to prioritize fatherhood over chiefdom, not when his village needed him more than his son did. Stoick followed after them, certain Hiccup would forgive him for choosing to tend to others rather than hold his hand through this.

After all, it had been that dragon Hiccup had reached for. Not him.

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Hiccup inhaled sunlight and a dusty, deeply sweet scent. He felt the fingers of too-much-sleep pressing into his eyes and the ache of lengthy immobility holding his body in place. His first reaction was to push out the newly invading senses and force himself back to sleep.

Something heavy thudded into the soft part of his stomach.
"Umph!" Hiccup winced through his sharp gasp and curled in around the thick, dark tail that struck him.

::You tried to die on me, you ungrateful Lun-a-tic::

The assault was forgivable. The boy grinned widely at the words—a smile so full of life and color that Toothless felt his body sag into the straw-mattress.

"Mmm...I'll try again tomorrow," Hiccup whispered.

The air felt so warm compared to what he last remembered. He risked opening his eyes to a world of light and warmth. His world—Midgard.

As his vision swam into focus Hiccup felt a surreal sense of displacement. He wasn't under Toothless' wing—a spot he was used to waking up in when he wasn't feeling well. Nor was he in his father's home. It took another moment of staring blankly at the overhanging bundles of dried herbs for Hiccup to recognize the home of the læknir, Bersi.

Still in a state of vertigo, Hiccup's mind wandered off at this revelation, realizing that Bersi was a healer trained by völva—Gudrid's son...he was in Gudrid's son's home—

A soft gasp startled the atmosphere. He turned his head.

Gudrid's granddaughter, Thyra, stood frozen in the doorway to the outside world with one foot on either side of the barrier. Her eyes were fixed on Hiccup's, the armful of burdock loosened.

"You're awake!" she stated, astonished.

Thyra took one step forward before stopping short. She made to turn toward a spouted pitcher on a table and stopped again. She looked ready to move to him but then seemed distracted by the door—beyond which knowledgeable adults would be.

The girl internally panicked on her next course of action.

Hiccup swallowed and tried to speak, "Why..."

Why was he here?

His throat hurt, so he must have been out for a while. He knew why he was here in a broader sense—he was injured. He and Toothless fought the demon and—by Thor he lived!

Thyra grinned at the sound of his voice. Round, freckled cheeks puffed around a sweet smile, showing off two distinct gaps for missing teeth.

She leaned back outside, having come to a decision.

"CHIEF STOICK!" she screamed out at such a volume even Toothless jumped. "HICCUP'S AWAKE!"

Thyra shut the door with a delicacy to suggest she did not want to disturb the woodwork. Then she gave him another bright smile.

"I'm so glad you're awake—it seems as if you've been asleep forever," she spoke as she pranced barefoot across the room to the pitcher.

::Two days:: Toothless intoned.
Hiccup quickly felt the results of two days inertia when he slowly pulled his torso into a seated position with a small wince. His head swam with his thirst and exhaustion. Confusion continued to peck at him.

"Wasn't sure when you'd wake," Thyra went on, paying the boys no mind as she poured water into a pewter goblet. It seemed to take much of her focus as the table was a bit high for her and the pitcher made of a heavy ceramic. "Pappa said it could be months—though I knew better. And everyone's been talking about what you did. It'll be put in the books and songs! Though I'm not sure how much of it is true..."

Thyra appeared to have the unique ability to keep a conversation going without ever needing input from the other side. Hiccup was instantly reminded of Camicazi.

::You had quite a number of people check up on you:: said Toothless. He was curled on the end of the large bed looking ready to sleep, but his eyes were alert and focused on Hiccup. ::Your drove sees a lot of value in you::

Thyra held the full goblet out to Hiccup before he could think of some witty response. Now that he could see her in better light he took note of a birthmark tinting the underside of her chin.

"Why am I here?" Hiccup rasped, graciously taking the cup from her. He drank deeply and spoke a little easier. "I mean, here. Was I seriously hurt or—?"

It just occurred to Hiccup to look at himself. Aside from a sweat-yellowed bandage on his arm, stiffness to his leg, and bone-deep exhaustion, Hiccup didn't think he needed so much attention.

Thyra read his expression.

"You look better now, but you weren't so good before. Pappa needed to take care of you better so we had you put here—you and Toothless. And so many people wanted to see you—we always had people in here, you know—"

::I already told him so:: Toothless sniffed, despite knowing she would never understand him.

Thyra snatched the cup from Hiccup's hand the second it emptied.

"Pappa's over at the Whittleman's fixing a broken hand. I've been taking care of you." Thyra's thick hair bobbed with each step as she returned to the pitcher for a refill. "I put the medicines on and changed your bandages, and I helped keep you warm...though Toothless did most of that. He was always on the bed. I can't believe it hasn't fallen apart yet."

"I—" A familiar and unwelcome harshness clogged his throat; he needed more water. Hiccup gave a couple of dry swallows and said, "Thank you."

Thyra smiled and returned the cup to him.

"Hiccup!"

The muffled yell was their only warning before the door banged open. A cluster of laurel flittered from the ceiling.

"Hiccup!" Stoick bellowed again, still retaining the volume of someone outside. The man's eyes flicked to the Night Fury draped across the end of the bed and back to Hiccup. "You..."

"Dad," Hiccup greeted with a weak smile.
Stoick walked up quickly with hands reaching out as though to take Hiccup in them, but he stopped himself just before. His hands fisted awkwardly by his side.

"You—you're alright?"

"Yes, I'm..."

Seeing his father jolted Hiccup's working mind. He picked things up faster—he was alive, Toothless was alive, his father was alive—and with that thought came the memory of the burning ship. The bodies...

"So...so did everything turn out okay?" Hiccup asked. "You're okay? How is everyone else?"

Stoick could read the cautious anxiety on his son's face. He sighed, picked up a stool by the wall with one hand and seated himself at his son's side.

"Lost a good number of men," he said in his usual gruff tone. "Maybe, maybe I shouldn't have pushed to follow you. You were right—we weren't prepared for that demon—"

"No," Hiccup cut in quickly, "no—I'm glad you followed me! I—we never would have been able to finish her off without your help."

Stoick rubbed a hand over his eyes, throwing off his son's attempt to mollify his conscious.

"We were ants...practically helpless against that beast. It was a massacre."

"You helped free the dragons from her control," Hiccup said strongly. He hadn't planned on explaining the mechanics of mankind's latent power to anyone, as he didn't quite fully understand it himself. "It's a...well, something happened when you did that—all those humans you brought there eliminated the threat of her army. I can't—it's hard to explain. But you really saved us there. We never would have been able to hit her like we did without you..."

Stoick didn't smile at Hiccup's admission or show any reaction to the gratitude other than acute sobriety. He focused on his son's face with such inquiry in his eyes that Hiccup had tensed before the man even spoke.

"Hiccup...what happened?" Stoick's question had hushed by the end, conveying his disbelief at the turn of the battle.

Hiccup couldn't answer at first; he didn't know where to start. His father shook his head, struck speechless for a moment more as the memory of his son flying into the nest replayed.

"Why would you...what was going through your head?" Stoick went on.

"I..." The answer was "not a lot".

"It was suicide!"

"I can't..." Hiccup looked at Toothless, who appeared just as helpless. "I can't explain it, really. It was more of a feeliii—ahh—Framherja!"

The last morsel of energy Hiccup had been seeking returned to him and it powered his alarm. He jerked forward, pain shooting up his legs and back.

"Easy!" Stoick yelped as Hiccup hissed.
Hiccup hardly heard him. His bow—Framherja—something had happened to her. Something bad—

::...Here::

Toothless tucked his head under the bed and emerged with Framherja. Hiccup opened his eyes from his pained grimace and immediately snatched the instrument into his possession.

"What...where's her string?" he asked helplessly. She was flaxen in color, as though she were tired and unresponsive.

:: Don't know:: said Toothless. ::Something happened to her after we left that ice world:::

"But—"

It snapped. Hiccup suddenly remembered feeling her snap against his chest and more questions came to him. He had fallen, so how did he survive? How did they get out?

::Your old friend caught you:: Toothless informed the unspoken inquiry. Hiccup continued staring at the bow with the most lost, incomprehensible expression.

"Hiccup, a sea serpent delivered you to us," Stoick said next, unwittingly in accord with Toothless. "In its mouth."

Hiccup jerked his words. Old Friend...there was only one sea serpent whose mouth he'd ever been in before. It found him. It saved him.

"A—it was a bloody—Hiccup will you put down that damn bow and look at me?"

Hiccup, who had been trying and trying to remember the sea serpent—or anything past Framherja's incomprehensible breaking—recovered from his dazing.

"Huh? Ah—yeah, sorry," he said in a quiet voice. He rested Framherja across his thighs, but his hold on her grip remained strong. She wasn't as warm as he remembered and he didn't like it. He wanted her warmer.

"You need to give me something, Hiccup. We're in the dark here. You flew off like a fool! The thing was going to die anyway, wasn't it? But you went after it anyway and then the volcano went off. Then a bloody sea serpent drops you off and you're ice to the touch. We almost had to take your foot—"

Hiccup yanked back the covers in a knee-jerk reaction. The movement pulled at the healing skin of his arm and incidentally slapped Toothless in the face with blankets.

::Almost!:: Toothless stressed, who did not like being jostled. ::He said almost:::

Hiccup stared at his left foot, which was splinted and swollen. He experimentally wiggled the toes and was shocked to find the entire area throbbing from the effort. They were sluggish to respond, stark white. Patches of his skin within the splint were raw and red.

"Frostnip, Hiccup," Stoick said for his benefit. "You flew into a volcano and came out looking like a body found in a hard winter—almost ended up as one too. Your foot was almost beyond saving."

"But it'll recover." Hiccup wanted reassurance. It was the foot that steered Toothless' tailfin and he could not afford to lose it.

Stoick continued to press him with that demanding stare.
"That's what's more. It should have been gone. Bersi thinks so, at any rate. I won't pretend to be a healer, but if your recovery from it has him scratching his head then I'm inclined to do the same."

::It's me—us:: Toothless softly informed him.

Hiccup nodded absently. He escaped this time because of Toothless—because he wasn't quite as fragile as a human body should be. But only just. His leg did feel cold. He drew the covers back over it and for added warmth Toothless rested his head on the limb, now curled half-across his legs like a giant, black kitten.

Hiccup would not tell his father how extensive his bonding with Toothless had gone. He couldn't. He didn't have the words or the courage at this moment. He knew how his father would react; already he had been extremely tolerant of having dragons in his village, but pushing too much mystic on the chief was cause for sparking his temper. Stoick the Vast had a healthy respect for the gods, but very little patience for tall tales.

"Hiccup," Stoick prompted again. His impatience began to show, annoyed that his son continually looked at that dragon for answers instead of speaking up himself.

"I don't know what to tell you," Hiccup said. "I really don't."

"Don't give me that," Stoick said in a low voice. "Not after what you put me through. You have some fire-bow, you fought up there more like a dragon than a human, you go after that dying beast—lunacy!—and you make it out by some miracle. Hiccup, you have to give me something more than that."

"I..."

::Tell him something:: Toothless advised. ::He's scared::

"I did get involved with some stuff," Hiccup began carefully. Still, he had to wince with the pressure it took to form those words. His father's stare felt too intense, he felt too tired. "And...I know, I knew, a lot because it was told to me. By Toothless and by Framjerja...and..."

And by the gods.

Hiccup bit his lip—Gods, how would he say this? His hand went to Toothless' crown, unconsciously seeking the comfort of those scales. He missed Stoick's face darkening with his inattention.

A gentle knock rocked the insufferable silence. Astrid stood at the door with knuckles still resting against the wood.

"Am I interrupting?" she asked, looking between Hiccup and Stoick.

"No," Stoick said before Hiccup could answer. He quickly stood. "No, he's all yours. I have, I have stuff to do. Chiefly duties—" He turned to Hiccup. "Hiccup, rest well. I'll—we'll talk again when you're feeling better."

He marched out the door, barely stopping to give Astrid a parting nod.

Thyra, who had busied herself with crushing leaves, took the opportunity to dart in and refill Hiccup's goblet of water.

Astrid approached the stool Stoick just abandoned as the boy drank. The abrupt departure of the chief had offset her, as told by the careful way she took in his expression.
"Hey," she said.

Hiccup swallowed, wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and returned, "Hey. You lived."

Astrid smiled, now more at ease. She had bandages all up her arm and a shiny, new scar coloring a corner of her brow, but her skin was well flushed and her posture strong.

"My life was never in question," she pointed out.

"Good to know," Hiccup smiled. He went back to petting Toothless' head. The dragon's eyes had closed under the ministrations. "Really, it's good...that you made it, I mean."

Astrid bobbed her head and tucked an errant strand of hair behind her ear.

"So...you're now the first Hooligan of our generation to be called a hero." She said it as a passing fact; leaving no hint to her feelings on him snatching an honor many expected her to manage first. "Granted--no one really knows why you did what you did..."

Hiccup's hand stilled on Toothless' brow.

"Not...not now, please."

Astrid held up her hands. "I'm not here to pry—I'm sure the truth will come out quickly enough seeing how you're all anyone seems to be able to talk about. How much does your father know?"

Hiccup stared at her, startled. She gave him a flat stare.

"Going by the way he just stormed out of here, I take it you wouldn't talk to him either."

Hiccup shook his head.

"I tried but...it wasn't enough for him. So, how is everyone out there?"

Astrid allowed the obvious topic change. He looked too pale and tired to antagonize at the moment.

"All the riders made it out alive." She grinned. "Just wait until you see what's going on out there. We've had a lot of dragons stopping in these last couple of days—a lot of people are bonding. Fishlegs even has this Gronkle following him around—so it looks like he'll have a riding dragon."

Hiccup brightened at the news.

"That's great! Though, I guess I'll have to stay a while. At least long enough to make sure Gobber knows how to manage harness and saddle designs."

"You were planning on leaving?" Astrid asked. She looked at Toothless, who hadn't responded to the implication.

"Well, eventually," Hiccup admitted. He went back to rubbing Toothless' head.

"When?"

"As soon as I'm able, I guess." A look passed over Astrid's face; she didn't agree with this decision. Hiccup added, "I think I've left Berk in a state to take care of herself. I did say until Berk is safe, didn't I? Which she is."

"I think we still need help," Astrid countered. "Hiccup, the dragons showing up here is great and all,
but not everyone is ready for it—not everyone knows how to ride or, or do all the tricks you do—"

"Then they'll learn, like I did," said Hiccup. "They have you and Fish and the others to train them. I have faith in you guys."

Much like his father earlier, Hiccup's words did nothing to soothe her. She continued to stare at him with dissatisfaction.

"And...and the Meatheads?" Hiccup asked, deciding to press a different subject.

Again, Astrid allowed it.

"Just sent them off home. But a Thing is going to be held in a few days' time—all the clans are coming. Not only to give them the details of ending the war but also to decide how the Meatheads should be punished."

Hiccup grimaced. "Wait, we need help with that?"

Astrid's expression told him she agreed with the skepticism.

"Well, they are arguing that their actions were responsible for ending the war, and therefore shouldn't be punished."

Hiccup scoffed, "Yeah, and responsible for the death of several good Vikings." Toothless' earfin twitched at hearing Hiccup say 'good' and 'Viking' in the same sentence. "Please tell me they aren't asking for a reward."

"No, they have a bit more tact than that, amazingly. Though..."

"Though, what?"

Astrid drew in a breath, crossed her arms, and turned her focus on a very dry bushel of Angelica root.

"Thuggory had the nerve to propose I marry him," she muttered.

"Thug—what?" Hiccup wracked his brain for anything that may have spurred the older man into such recklessness.

"In front of the village," Astrid went on, deadpan. "At a meeting."

"...are you?"

Her head whipped around to him.

"Of course I'm not!" she snapped. Hiccup thought she looked rather flustered. "After everything he did? I just—why would he do that?"

"You shouldn't have hit him," Hiccup stated. "Nothing turns a guy on faster—"

Astrid punched him in the arm before he could finish.

The same arm fresh in the stages of recovery.

"Augh!" Hiccup cried out and clutched at it tightly, willing the throbbing to ease. The bandages felt warm under his grip, the warmest part of his body.
Astrid's hands flew to her mouth.

"Oh gods—I'm sorry!" she gasped into her palms. "I wasn't thinking—!

"Toothless!" Hiccup grouched through clenched teeth. "Did you see that?"

The dragon hadn't so much as opened an eye at Hiccup's pained cry.

::Verbal primary—I have no experience with this::

"What part of that was verbal?" Hiccup hissed. He kicked at the dragon. Or tried to; he could only manage a slight twitched under Toothless' substantial weight.

"He lives!"

Hiccup and Astrid both gave a start as Tuffnut marched into the room with arms swinging.

"And he looks human!" Snotlout added, following close behind.

Ruffnut came in last, rolling her eyes.

"Hey," she greeted in the closest semblance to normalcy. "It took you two days to wake up."

"Is that fast or slow?" Hiccup asked wryly.

"Well, looking at you now I'd say slow," Tuffnut decided. He came to a stop beside Astrid and gave Hiccup's condition a sweeping assessment. Hiccup thought the blond looked disappointed.

"Not nearly as exciting as the rumors, is he?" Ruffnut asked her brother, speaking as though Hiccup weren't even in the room.

"Rumors..." Hiccup prompted carefully. He looked at Astrid, who shook her head. Her frown showed her intolerance towards said rumors.

Snotlout was more than happy to jump in with the answer.

"There's a rumor going around that they had to amputate everything—everything—and now you're just a parsnip waiting to die."

"What?"
"They started that rumor," Ruffnut inflected before Snotlout or Tuffnut could elaborate. She nudged her prominent chin at him. "So how are you actually doing? You do have all your limbs, don't you?"

"Yes," Hiccup deadpanned.

"Because we just passed your dad and he didn't look too happy."

Hiccup exhaled audibly. "Yeah, you know—er, well, maybe you don't know—but it was just a typical disagreement. It doesn't have anything to do with how I'm—well, with my condition—"

"He's fine," Astrid intoned. "He'll be out of here in no time."

Only Hiccup caught the double meaning. He frowned at the jab.

"That's good," Ruffnut said distractedly. Her focus had fallen on some potent-scented horehound. She, nor the other two, suspected Astrid referred to anything but the hospice.

"Dude, I'm liking the ginger-beard," Tuffnut snickered.

Snotlout grinned, and Hiccup couldn't tell if it were mean or not; his cousin always had hard features.

"Hiccup the Gingerbeard!" Snotlout tried. "I like it. Sounds piratey."

Tuffnut nudged his friend's side, "Hey, he's got half the heroic hair. That'll match his new status."

Snotlout's smile fell.

Hiccup grimaced as they jibed and placed a hand over a jaw that had gone from rough to soft seemingly overnight. He cast a nervous glance on Toothless, who had opened one eye and glared reproachfully at him.

"I'll fix it later," Hiccup mumbled.

"Don't," said Ruffnut, having heard him. "I like it."

Her brother scoffed.

"Why? Because Tumble's a gingerbeard too?"

Ruffnut threw her elbow into his side.

"Screw off!" she bit out.

"Ow—you gnome!"

"Where's Fish?" Astrid asked Snotlout over their bickering.

"Hounding Gobber for saddle designs," answered Snotlout. "He's not going to get it, though. Gobber's already swamped—"

"Oh yeah," Tuffnut cut in. He had one hand holding his sister by her cheek with his head cocked to the side from the force of her pulling his hair. "Hiccup, you better be prepared for him to barge in here."

"He's already taken a dozen measurements of that Gronkle," Ruffnut added, muffled by her brother's hold on her cheek, before she bit at Tuffnut's hand. He retracted it quickly.
"He'll want your help with designs," Tuff finished.

Hiccup groaned and fell back on the bed. He decided he had woken up a day too early. He wanted to go back to sleep.

"Too many people!"

For the umpteenth time since he woke up, Hiccup was treated to an unexpected voice by the door. He couldn't see due to Snotlout's broad torso blocking his view, but he knew the voice well by now. Thyra marched into the room, into his sight, having returned from the well with more water for the pitcher. She placed the bucket under the table.

"What?" Tuffnut said dumbly.

"Too many people," Thyra repeated and with one hand on her hip, she thrust her other out to point towards the door. "You all have to leave."

She stuck her chin in the air as she spoke. Hiccup received the general impression that she acted on examples set by her father.

"We just got here," Astrid pointed out.

At the same time Ruffnut said, "We were just visiting."

Thyra appeared to swell with the next breath she took, drawing strength to face off against women far older and larger than she.

"This is not the Mead Hall!" Definitely her father's words. "And he just woke up—he needs to rest!"

"Well it's not like he's doing much besides laying there," Snotlout said with a flippant wave of his hand.

::I'm with the man-ling on this:: Toothless sighed tiredly. Dragons had their own methods of recovery, even then the injuries weren't visible. And it required a lot of rest. ::Too many::

"They're called children," Hiccup whispered, but he felt inclined to agree. Now that he was lying down sleep sounded really, really good, no matter that he'd just slept nearly three days.

Thyra marched right up to Snotlout and hit him with the nearest thing she could get her hands on—a handful of tied pepperwort buds.

Snotlout looked at the wilted stems in her hands, then at Tuffnut, who had sucked in a startled breath, and then back at Thyra.

He barely felt the plant against his furs; it was the action itself that left him bemused.

"I am your future chief!" Snotlout declared with his voice raised in an effort to intimidate her.

"And I am your future healer!" Thyra hit him again with the pepperwort. A few flowerheads shook free. "And if you don't want me to let you die someday, then you will listen to me!"

Tuffnut lost the will to hold in his laugh.

"Oh, she has you there," Ruffnut snickered.

"We'll leave," Astrid assured the girl. Her voice was soft and soothing but Hiccup could see the
smile she fought to control. She stood from the stool and ushered Snotlout away from Thyra. "Com'on 'future chief:'"

"That was good," Tuffnut guffawed. "Owned by a little girl—ow! Shi—dude!"

Snotlout had punched the male Thorston in the shoulder, hard. Ruffnut pushed both boys none too gently towards the door. Astrid followed behind her, herding the group of them into obeying Thyra's wishes.

"We'll be back later," she said.

Hiccup lifted one hand for the parting just before the door shut behind Astrid.

His good leg started to hurt from the weight of Toothless but he was too tired to care. He watched as Thyra spilt water onto the floor in an effort to pour it from the bucket into the pitcher.

"You'll be a force to reckon with," Hiccup commented. "You'll be good for this village."

Thyra looked up with wide eyes. In contrast to the pushy little girl of earlier, she seemed to shrink in on herself. Biting her lip, she lifted the newly filled pitcher back to its saucer on the table.

"No one would have argued with Amma," she said. "I want to be as good for the village as she was."

Hiccup closed his eyes—because he suddenly saw too much of Gudrid in the shade of Thyra's hair and the shape of her eyes.

"You will be," he whispered. Then sleep welcomed him.

The moon had risen, shining and watchful over a village that had just hailed slumber. The day had been an exciting one for the villagers of Berk: their young hero had awoken—briefly, but his proven consciousness was cause for a collective sigh of relief. The village had been abuzz; hopes had soared for his aid in integrating dragons with their lifestyles and everyone wanted to hear Hiccup's account of the battle.

Yes, the inhabitants of Berk could only be exhausted after such exhilaration.

So no one would expect to find a large figure moving up the steepest path of Berk's tallest mountain. A dripping mass was slung over the man's shoulder; it left a trail of red as evidence of the midnight excursion, a trail only visible in the passing flicker of the traveler's guiding light.

It wasn't until he was a good and deep within the forests that Stoick dared light his torch. It would not do to have anyone catch sight of his burden.

The chief limped up the last steps to the shrine. The leg injury he sustained in the Battle of the Nest had not healed enough for such a trek and this would likely set him back in his recovery. Every step since he left the village had caused him pain—because every step he thought of Hiccup... of his frail, broken body being laid before his feet by the tongue of a sea serpent.

His son had nearly died.
Valka had died on that island—the very same island. At the mouth of a beast. Of that beast. The demon Hiccup had warned them of. The demon Stoick had seen just days before.

He tried not to picture it: the image of his wife dropped into the gaping, gargantuan maw. He tried not to think of how she likely died in terror.

He missed her; he missed her dearly. For a very long while, Stoick didn't know if he could differentiate between love and longing, as he felt both in equal amounts when it came to Valka—before and after her death.

She left him repeatedly in their life together, but she always came back. Always, until the day he learned where loss deviated from leaving. Loss never came back. It was the hardest lesson he ever learned.

For two horribly cruel years Stoick had tried to come to terms with the fact that he lost his son as well.

But Hiccup came back—he returned a hero, more of a man than Stoick could have hoped for, and, in a twisted sense, the son he always wanted.

It was a sign. An opportunity. A blessing.

Stoick pushed his hand against a broken stone as he came to the clearing atop their outdoor hof. The circle of cow skulls leered at him, even more sinister in the dark. The moon made the bone glow and the hollows of their eyes deep and sucking.

Stoick pulled his attention to a tablet of stone positioned between two hörgr. He shouldered his burden onto the altar and it hit the post with a heavy slap. The head lolled off the edge, a useless tongue peeking between coarse-haired lips.

Hiccup couldn't leave. Not now. Not when he had just returned. It was too soon. An old wound had reopened on that blustery evening when he first reunited with son, in this very spot. It could heal right this time if it was properly cared for. If he had his son with him, if he were a part of Hiccup's day to day life.

Who knew what Hiccup would get up to out there, too far from his father's protection.

Stoick lifted bloodstained fingers to the sky, his head bent over his sacrifice.

Hiccup wouldn't speak to him. Stoick had his boy back and yet they were still worlds apart. So he would reach out to Hiccup the only way he suspected the youth would listen: through the very elements he feared Hiccup had gotten mixed up in.

Stoick closed his eyes and began to speak.

"Please, gods—Odin—any who reside in the realm of Asgard, I ask that you answer my prayer. Don't take my boy from me."

Something had happened in that Nest. Something unnatural had hurt them, something unexplainable. Hiccup hardly seemed fazed when told a sea serpent had delivered him back to the village, and that boded ill to Stoick.

"Keep him here," Stoick begged. He tried to focus, tried to keep down the horrors of whatever else Hiccup could get caught up in whilst off on his own. "Keep Hiccup here!" He didn't want to lose his son again. He was given a second chance. He would do better. He would listen, be there for him...
"Please, please... Please don't take my boy from me again..."

The wind picked up, early and warm for an autumn wind. Decorative bones rattled under the force of it.

Beneath the dancing braids of his beard, Stoick smiled.

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Toothless prodded the newly exposed skin with his muzzle. His nose wrinkled at the fetid scent swelling from the thick yellow clinging to the wound's edges.

::That is disgusting—::

"Toothless..." Hiccup pushed the dragon away with his free hand. "Leave it."

::Why is it doing that?::

Hiccup looked at the wide gash in his arm, recently revealed as Bersi set to getting him fresh bandages. Usually after three days the blood would have clotted and the beginnings of a scab would appear, but this was still moist and now stung with juices and puss.

"I'm not sure," he said under his breath. He kept his eyes on Bersi rummaging through a basket of clean cloths.

::I don't like its smell::

"It'll heal. It just needs to be treated."

::Well if you just let me—::

"You're not licking it," said Hiccup quickly. He pulled a face at the thought for even he could smell it. "Why would you want to?"

:: Because rubbing things into it that you plucked from trees or pulled from the ground is stupid::

"It actually helps humans. You should try listening to me some time," Hiccup whispered. He brought a hand up to hover over the throbbing area.

"Oi! No touchin'!"

Hiccup jerked at Bersi's bark. The man had returned bearing a small bowl of cypress-oil extract.

::I'm hungry:: Toothless decided. ::I'll be back::

Hiccup suspected the dragon just couldn't take the smell of the infection any longer.

Toothless used his tail to pull the door open—a simpler task with one tailfin. It took only a little tug before the whole thing swung into the house with the full force of the wind. Toothless galloped off into the tempest, leaving rafter-hung plants to swing wildly and wooden bowls of seeds to tip over.

Bersi swore and ran over to the entrance. It took throwing his whole body against the thick oak to close it once more.
"Bloody, effin' weather—!" Bersi grumbled, straightening a few things as he returned to Hiccup. "'N' where is he goin'?"

Bersi laid the new bandages over his leg once he had seated himself by Hiccup and reached for the extract.

"To get some cod most likely," Hiccup answered with a shrug of his good shoulder.

"Hmm," Bersi sniffed. "I trust he'll be staying away from the hawks, then?"

Hiccup stilled. "What do you mean?"

The læknir set to ripping a good-sized mopping rag from the cloths. His head shook.

"All I know is our fastest messenger hawk wasn't around when we needed to contact Mogadon about that treachery incident. Now I'm not pointin' fingers—"

"It was him," Hiccup deadpanned. He was going to kill Toothless when the dragon came back.

"Your loyalty to one another is exemplary," Bersi said, just as dry.

Hiccup ignored the goad.

"But I swear there won't be any more," he promised. He suspected Toothless only went after the bird because Hiccup forbade him from eating it in the first place.

"How about pigs?"

"Pi—?" Hiccup started to ask, but his inquiry ended in a hiss as Bersi applied the stinging ointment to the wound.

"Aye, Munchglob was gripin' all mornin' about some hog that disappeared in the night," Bersi went on as he worked. He wiped his hands clean of the ointment. "Anyway, this infection looks like it's finally clearin'. Goin' by the discoloration o' your skin I'd have to say it was poison. Zippleback claw?"

"Ah, yes," Hiccup answered slowly, unsure if it were truthful. There were so many claws when he got these injuries...how was he to know?

Bersi clicked his tongue. He began to slowly re-wrap the wound in clean bandages.

"I should have been there," he said. "We could have come back with so many more—"

"Or we could have come back to no læknir—" Hiccup's counterargument cut off in a small yelp. His eye narrowed at Bersi, who gave the fresh bandaging an extra firm tug to ensure the wound was properly covered.

It was as gentle as a Viking healer would ever be, and Hiccup had to admit—his arm did look better, as did his leg. The swelling in his foot had gone down and he had been allowed to walk around for a bit that morning. Hiccup intended to walk out of the hospice before nightfall, regardless of permission. His healing had progressed to the point where restlessness and boredom became too prevalent for him to bear idleness any longer.

It would be best to set all his affairs in order before then.

"Well," Hiccup said, folding his hands in his lap, "since you've been treating me for full wounds I
expect you'll want some tangible pay."

Bersi, who had just stood up from the stool, stared at him. Hiccup had obviously caught him off guard.

"I feel obligated to do yeh this service for free," Bersi responded after a beat. He balled the dirtied wraps and tossed them in a wicker basket already brimming with cloth.

Hiccup shook his head.

"No, no. The world runs on favors," he said. "I can't stand being indebted to others. Just let me pay you something."

"Then consider you saving us a favor, 'n' call it even," Bersi said in his crisp manner. "I'll not be acceptin' any pay from yeh, as I can't stand being indebted to others."

"Alright—" Hiccup grudgingly began.

"'N' you're to drink the tea I'll be sendin' Thyra up with," Bersi went on. "Do not argue with her—"

"Wouldn't dream of it," Hiccup muttered, Snotlout in mind.

"—It's yarrow 'n' it'll help yeh heal. I'd let her change the bandages on yer leg as well. That one shouldn't need any medicines."

Changing the bandages on his leg wound would require taking off his pants in front of a little girl. Hiccup gave another long-suffering sigh. So be it.

"Okay, okay." He might have found it a mite awkward, but Hiccup thought it was nice that Thyra's father, and even her grandmother, played active roles in helping the girl reach her potential. "So I take it she's your apprentice? She seems to be in here a lot."

Bersi spared Hiccup a quick glance and went back to pressing some leaves.

"She'll likely be the læknir after I'm gone, but we're expectin' a bit more out o' her. I may know a lot about herbs, but I'm no vǫlva. No, she must take over her grandmother's post some day. My mother taught Thyra all she knew before Odin's grace took her, 'n' I shall teach her all I know before my time."

Hiccup smiled, thankful that Bersi no longer faced him because he feared an evident sadness would read too easily in his eyes.

"Your mother..." Hiccup hardly recognized the words coming out of his own mouth. "Did she—"

The first scream sounded from the outside world—high and female and quickly choired by many more.

Bersi's head whipped around to the door. His eyes narrowed.

"What the..."

It was as if someone took a wool blanket and wrapped it around Hiccup's head; he suddenly found it hard to follow the læknir moving across the floor, scarcely heard the door open or the augmented screams. Hot wind pushed at his face from the broken barrier but the muffling sensation that had overtaken his senses buffered its full effect.
There was a dangerous, powerful presence out there. He knew it, somehow, without having to see. It intoxicated his curiosity and threatened his instincts. It called for him to recognize it, to react to it.

"Oh dear Odin," Bersi gasped and it helped pull Hiccup's attention outside of his inner distraction. The man had gone very pale. From the light of the door Hiccup could see a dark shadow reflect in his eye.

Another scream joined the rest. Inhuman. Draconic.

Hiccup threw himself from the bed. The splint cracked under his sudden weight and his leg threatened to buckle, but forces beyond his own power propelled him onward. He sprinted past Bersi, who could only sputter at his patient running into the unknown. By its own accord, Hiccup's hand darted out during his movement and enclosed around Framherja's grip just before he cleared the hospice.

The winds were every bit as fearsome as they threatened to be. The ceaseless gust molded his oversized tunic around his body, tangled his hair, and burdened his hearing and sight. Though forced to squint, Hiccup would have had to be born blind to miss the cause of mayhem.

Rising from the sea was a figure of a man, and if it weren't for the panicking, shrieking Vikings surrounding him Hiccup would have first assumed it were a hallucination. He may just as well have still been unconscious.

The figure was a shade off of opaque, dark, undefined, and looming from the waters of Hooligan Harbor to stand at an unfathomable height. Nearly four-dozen rôsts tall, the only reason Hiccup could capture its full size in his vision was his considerable height and distance from the harbor.

Weapons were thrown; spears and axes hurtled through the air, high enough to strike at the specter's belly. They passed through the figure as if it were made of the blackest smoke and continued on their paths to plunge into the icy depths of the sea.

"What..." Hiccup whispered. "What...?"

For a moment, Hiccup could only stand and gape. The hair on his arms and neck had risen. He became acutely aware that all the dragons had fled—and that was a very bad omen.

Then the scream sounded again—the one that stood apart from the hundreds of human cries, the one that spurred him from his bed rest. Even from beyond Huge Hill, Hiccup could see the massive hand of this creature, pressing down on a trapped dragon.

Toothless.

Only his triangular head was visible between the thumb and forefinger of the entity; the coloring of monster and dragon were so similar it were a miracle they could be differentiated at all. But Hiccup knew. He knew Toothless' cry and his presence. He knew when Toothless was in danger.

A hole had appeared in the faceless head—gaping and black, wide and curved—just before a booming laugh rolled across the skies, rich enough to mock thunder and toxic in its presence.

The body leaned over, pressed harder, and another cry fell from the dragon's lips. The monster delighted in it.

A very strange thing happened. Rather than the panic or horror one would expect Hiccup to react with, Hiccup felt a calming power settle over him. A power of necessity—so potent even the wind seemed to have lost its drive.
Thought had abandoned him. Hiccup didn't have to think on what this creature was—if it were a horror that had followed them from Niflheim, bent on revenge—or why it attacked Toothless. Nor did he wonder how the string had reappeared between Framherja's limbs.

Hiccup's thumb found the familiar touch of the string's fiber and drew it back. Energy pulled from his body, energy he needed for recovery and it left him stinging cold, but in that moment he could not tell.

He aimed and he released.

The lightning did what man's weapons could not—the intangible body swallowed the fire. Energy crackled like the popping of kindle; something within the figure lit up, and in that flash the figure had suddenly humanized. Sharp features, dark, groomed and handsome illuminated in the blink of an eye. Deep, gleeful eyes flickered of green and red.

Then it passed, shadow encompassing the silhouette once more, and any who may have been watching at that time would forever wonder if they had seen the face at all.

The villagers' cheers began before the air had quieted, helping to erase the sudden and confusing attack. The time for questioning would begin soon enough, but for this moment they wanted to hail the redeemed son of the chief saving them for the second time in a week.

No one saw the ghostly, black hand of vapors—as tall as a grown man—shoot forward from the last wisps of the Jötunn's position. It moved through the air with an otherworldly disturbance, unattached to any arm, passing through barns and homes—invisible to humans.

No one saw it pass through Hiccup's body and continue on to the skies. No one saw the shining force of energy it took as its trophy.

No one, that is, except for a young priestess-in-training who followed the victorious hand with her eyes, helpless to stop it.

The inhabitants of Berk only saw Hiccup fall as though pushed backwards, the smiles on their faces dying with his descent. He hit the ground and Framherja rolled from his slack grip, as dull and dark as any bow made from wood.


Hiccup swallowed a couple of times; consciousness came to him in a slow, rising wave. The usual post-waking confusion plagued him; he didn't know where he was or how he got there. All he knew was that it was very bright beyond his eyelids and he wasn't ready to face that light.

A shadow passed overhead.

"Toothless...if you try to lick me, I will kill you," Hiccup warned, feeling particularly grumpy. He hated waking with intense light on his face.
"No one here has any intention of licking you."

Hiccup did not open his eyes, even when he had the strength to do so. Gods, oh gods, he was—

"Dead," Hiccup whispered. "I'm dead."

"I should say not." Gudrid sounded delightfully amused.

Hiccup gathered all the courage and daring he had left in his being and opened his eyes. He was exactly where he last stood—just outside Bersi's home—but the village was silent. Somewhere in his mind Hiccup knew the village was empty, that this was nothing more than a setting for Hugrvöllr. He sought her face without any care for his surroundings and found it, leaning over him, a dreamed sun haloing her with light.

Gods, she was every bit as beautiful as he remembered. Smooth skin and brown hair, clear, grey eyes looking down on him with fondness...

"Gudrid?" he croaked.

She cocked her head to the side. "Yes."

_Gods, she was here!_

He sat up with a deep inhalation. She was crouched by him. They were face-to-face—so close. Closer than they had been in ages.

"I thought—" He thought he'd never see her again, that she was lost to him in every world. "I thought you were..."

"Yes?"

Gudrid looked rightly concerned now; his behavior had thrown her when usually she was so adept at reading him.

_She didn't know_, Hiccup thought in cold realization. _She had no idea..._

How would he tell her? How would he tell her that he met her in life, that they would never meet as they were now, that she would wait for him in vain? That she _died_ already?

_Should_ he tell her?

"What is it?" she prompted again.

"Uh—" he cleared his throat. "What happened? To me, I mean. I—"

Memories resurfaced. Framherja returned to him, that creature—the giant—and Toothless—

"Toothless!" he gasped. "That thing! That—did—"

Gudrid pressed two fingers to his lips. Hiccup fought down a very inappropriate urge to kiss them because the touch reminded him of how soft those hands were to his mouth.

"Toothless is fine," she said, but even with his silence she didn't remove her hand from his face. Her fingers roved to the short beard, noting the new texture. "It is you that we need to worry about."

"Me? What?" The Jötunn kept returning into his mind's eye. "What—who _was_ that?"
Gudrid took her hands to his lap and folded them primly. Even with a beard Hiccup missed the warmth she had taken with her.

"Loki," she answered.

"Loki!" Hiccup gasped. "Wait...Loki? Loki-Loki? What?"

"I suppose you would more readily believe a Jötunn with what you saw," said Gudrid. "But recall that Loki is a shape shifter, and one of his many forms is Jötunn."

Hiccup squinted in thought, still trying to keep up to speed.

"But he’s a god. Why would..." His hand clenched and he realized the absence of his bow. "Oh...so I...?"

"You do not regret it," Gudrid stated in an observation. Hiccup did not appear remorseful, just confused and contemplated on why his actions were necessary, not their consequences.

He looked at her and his eyes flashed.

"Of course I don't! But why was Loki attacking our village? No—Toothless! Why was he attacking Toothless?"

He leaned forward, completely focused on her answer.

"He answered a prayer, as gods tend to do," Gudrid said delicately.

Fury like Hiccup had never felt before reared up within him. For a moment he forgot with whom he spoke and his aggression went unchecked.

"Someone prayed for—"

"No," Gudrid had a power in her soft voice that managed to cut off his anger. "Prayers are liable to be interpreted however the acting god pleases. Answering prayers are often nothing more than a whim to them. The prayer was for you to remain in Berk."

Hiccup gave a hollow laugh. "And I can't leave if I don't have a dragon, right?"

Gudrid rested a hand on his arm. "I am sure that was not the intent. It is rather obvious to all that Loki took this prayer and twisted it in a way that would force you to break your promise. He did it to attack Thor through you."

"He...he what?" Hiccup didn’t care about the details of the prayer anymore or who had made it. For the first time since he woke in Hugrvöllr, Hiccup feared for himself.

Gudrid gave his arm a small squeeze; it did nothing to comfort him.

"You have Thor's favor," she said. "And anything Thor likes, Loki wants to see destroyed. They are gods, and they are children."

"Oh, you have got to be kidding me," Hiccup said miserably.

"There was a lot of debate on what to do with you."

"What to do with me?" Hiccup repeated. The phrasing had him alarmed.
"Well, there is the question of whether you should be accountable at all."

Hiccup regarded her for a moment. He was oddly reminded of the Meatheads, and how they had made a similar argument.

"I shot a God," Hiccup reminded her. "When I promised never to do so. Not with Framherja anyway."

"However," Gudrid continued, leveling a stare at him that told him to quiet. "Loki was in his giant form—giants, with whom the gods are destined to fight."

Hiccup perked up. His mind analyzed her words.

"It's like a loophole?" he said hopefully.

"In a way," Gudrid conceded. "You will be granted reprieve. This time."

"That's good then, isn't it?" Maybe this was a freebie? Maybe he could walk away from this with just a slap on the wrist.

"Reprieve for your actions, yes. But you have garnered Loki's attention as well."

And Hiccup deflated. "How so?"

"You will not be punished for striking him, and Loki has taken that as an offense. I warned you before, Hiccup, that Thor was attracted to you out of many others for your intellect. One of Thor's champions thwarted Loki's trap. And Loki prides himself on his clever schemes. He won't forget this."

"So..." Hiccup narrowed his eyes, trying to understand exactly what happened. "So because Thor thought I would make a fun hero, Loki decided to pick on me. And now that I won't be punished as he thinks I should be...he's pissed at me too?"

"No one ever said the gods were reasonable," Gudrid said regretfully.

"But...but how sure of this are you? I mean, you said before it's all about interpretation—"

Gudrid shook her head. "It is true that I spent my whole life trying to figure out what the gods wanted me to know..."

She spoke of her 'whole life' as Hiccup would his, as a significant measure of time. But knowing how long she would live, knowing that this was only the beginning, hardly deserving of a 'whole' as if it were significant, put into perspective his own lifespan. What was this for him? This time in his young life where everything was changing? A prologue to what he unwillingly agreed to?

"I'm sorry Hiccup." And Gudrid truly looked regretful as she spoke it. "I get more than visions, I get whispers. I know their expectations of you, their plans for you..."

Hiccup gave a humorless laugh as his irritation rose to new heights. His hands moved through his hair and gripped the strands in frustration—it was loose, as it had been during his recovery, passing his shoulders and dirty after the recent stretch without wash.

"Why?" Hiccup hissed. Despair settled over him. "Why me? I didn't ask for this—I never wanted this kind of attention before. Even as a kid, I just wanted people attention, not godly attention."

"You know why," Gudrid said patiently.
"But I still don't understand," Hiccup stressed. "I know I decided to free a dragon and...and help it, and that was w—" He stopped himself from saying 'wrong', "—weird...but I wouldn't have been the first. I couldn't have been, not with all the other people and all the other dragons in the world. Not for as long as our people have existed!"

"Others have tried," Gudrid agreed, "and died. You did not."

"I didn't die because—oh..." Hiccup deflated. "So Toothless played a big part in it too?"

"Yes, but it is more than that." Gudrid appeared thoughtful for a while as she worked out the best way to explain this to him. "Life is a series of choices, Hiccup, and it is through these choices that we forge our paths, our destinies. The gods create situations to force us to make choices, to set apart the people who are meant to play a bigger role in this world.

"Millions have the making of a hero, Hiccup, and their entire lives are composed of choices. Some of their decisions show them as brave and capable individuals. And then there is that one choice; somewhere along the line they make a choice that shows they are only meant to be a brave and capable human. The choice that a brave and capable man makes is not always the choice a hero makes.

"You made all the right choices...and the right choices are not always good choices, and the right choices are not always right for personal reasons. But they are right in defining what makes a Hero."

A lot of those choices were because of you, Hiccup wanted to say, but he could not let on about her future decisions as the Elder. Even as he felt his composure slip with every word she spoke, he knew enough to never reveal the future if presented with the opportunity.

Gudrid said she did the things she did because she wanted to see the man she spoke to now. Hiccup became that man by acting on her direction. It was a circle, one feeding into the other. The songs of old taught him the dangers of breaking circles.

Gudrid carried on, for once out of tune with Hiccup's thoughts.

"Attention is garnered with every favorable decision, and the more a potential hero pleases the gods, the more the gods will test this person. Hiccup, you must know that every choice you made, even as far as questioning tradition as a small boy, brought more and more attention to yourself until a god decided you would make a hero. And then you continued to make choices to solidify this decision. Even your last choice—shooting Loki against warning—was the right Hero choice."

Hiccup kept his eyes shut, wallowing in a painful resignation.

"I don't want to be a hero."

"No sane man does."

His eyes opened and they rolled heavenward. "Neither do the insane..."

Gudrid didn't say anything for a moment; Hiccup got the impression she was allowing him time to digest this fortune.

"So, now what?" he said, still embittered by the whole ordeal. "I'm a Hero, I did what they wanted. Are the gods done messing with me?"

The vördr looked at him in admonishment.
"You know, as well as I, that gods do not leave Heroes alone. Loki feels slighted by you. Had you been punished accordingly and had Thor lost a champion, then it would not be so. But you escaped his intended wrath."

Hiccup pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed for the hundredth time upon "waking."

"Did I hurt him?"

"Not at all," Gudrid immediately responded. "He is fine—furious, of course, though not by anything you did to him. Aside from gaining too much favor. He is more maddened by the ruling of the gods."

Hiccup was almost too afraid to ask, but he had to.

"And what did the gods rule?"

"First," Gudrid started with great heed, "You must take into account the facts of what happened not long ago. You fired against a god—but a god that was in Jötunn form. Then Loki took your soul as punishment. I believe he intended to deliver you to Hel."

Hiccup's breath stilled. He had not considered what had gotten him here.

"He killed me?"

Gudrid took her lip between her teeth. She seized both of Hiccup's hands and held them fast in her own. Hiccup was not comforted by the action. He was even more offset that she did not immediately respond with "no".

"Hiccup," she began slowly. Her caution came across just as foreboding as her actions. "Do you recall the day I gave you Framherja?"

"Yes."

"The day you were executed?"

"I wasn't executed, I was just hurt really bad," Hiccup corrected her.

"No," Gudrid's voice was barely above a whisper. "No. You were executed."

"No—"

"Hiccup, you died."

Her hands tightened around his when he jerked back.

"What?" He shook his head. "No! I was—"

"Dead. It was only through the gods' graces that life was restored to you but for a short while your body was broken and life gone," Gudrid went on hurriedly, perhaps under the mistaken impression that forcing the whole explanation on him would calm him. Hiccup tried to pull his hands back—he needed to stand, to pace—but she held them tighter still. "At Thor's bidding your body was healed and your soul returned, and you were given his token. The gods have granted you salvation once again by undoing Loki's deed, and in return expect your unyielding cooperation."

"What if I didn't want their graces?" Hiccup asked. Anger swooped through his belly once more and he had half a mind to yank away from Gudrid's support. He was sick of this, the manipulation.
"I know, it is unfair—"

"Why couldn't they just let me die instead of forcing me into their debt?"

"You made all the choices," Gudrid pointed out, as though he should have been aware that making unconventional decisions would lead to this. "And you cannot think of leaving Toothless now, can you?

She had him there.

"No," he muttered. Though it did little to cool his resentment.

"You died once, Hiccup," Gudrid stated again, "Your life could be restored, but it could never be the same after it was taken. The gods regard you as in their custody since that death. They simply granted you a little more time in Midgard," the unspoken 'to see what you would do next' hung in the air. "Now you are back in their custody—through heroics, yes, but you put yourself back here nonetheless—and the price for your placement will be steeper."

Suspicious, Hiccup narrowed his eyes. "What are you saying?"

"It all goes back to your sentence," Gudrid said. She had fallen into a businesslike manner. "You challenged a Jötunn, you are marked as a hero, and you are regarded as one of the passed. You certainly will not be sent to Hel."

Hiccup managed to keep all remarks to himself, because nothing he felt like saying in that moment would have been appropriate in front of Gudrid.

"Now, it is custom for heroes to reside in Valhalla," Gudrid said. Hiccup missed the sparkle in her eye when he hung his head. "You, however, seem more comfortable in Midgard."

Hiccup snapped his head up.

"Huh?"

Gudrid managed to keep the smile from her face but her eyes were bright.

"You may see it as a punishment or a blessing," she carried on, "but, by the divine order of Thor and endorsed by Odin, you are sentenced to suffer Midgard until Ragnarök. Then you shall play your part."

"I'm going to be in Midgard until Ragnarök," Hiccup repeated in an attempt to force his mind to absorb this. "But the gods see me as dead...wait, suffer Midgard? So...so I'm a draugr now?"

He felt numb as the horrible word touched his lips. Gudrid appeared highly amused at his conclusion.

"Draugr reside in bodies that are dead. It was your soul that was taken from your body, not life, and the body can sustain itself for some time without a soul. You will be returned while your body is in full health—health that was granted after your actual death. So, no, you will not become a draugr," she explained.

Hiccup visibly relaxed, but he could not fully rid himself of the tension that had accumulated in his time in Hugrvöllr.

"I'll be human?" he needed to clarify.
"Human, yes. But a human with expectations not commonly found in life. Your body was restored in hopes that you may champion the gods. Your soul will be restored because you have proven you can champion the gods."

Hiccup filed away the information. He felt incapable of thinking on it at the moment.

"Will I age?" he asked.

"With Toothless."

"Can I die?"

"You are, effectively, already dead," she said slowly. "But your body can be damaged, irreparably so, so do try to be careful."

Something touched Hiccup's ears, a voice floating in from the very air itself—young and sweet, but haunting.

Hiccup ignored the noise. He had too many questions.

"So—so I'm immortal?" he asked.

Gudrid smiled. "I did not say that."

"Right," he whispered, "until Ragnarök..." But how long would that take? What if Ragnarök happened tomorrow? What if he had been sentenced to one extra day of life? "When is Ragnarök?"

Fornu lag, mistakast ekki þín tilgangurinn...

Gudrid gave no indication that she could hear the same voice Hiccup did. She moved her head in the negative.

"That I do not know. Even the gods do not know. The plans are still unfolding, the prophecies still forming."

"But..." That didn't help him at all! "How will I know when Ragnarök is here?"

...Snúðu til baka, horfin sál... Aftur á við til mín...

"You will listen for it," Gudrid replied.

...Of snemma förú þú... Góður vinur, ábyrgð ástkær mín...

Hiccup shook his head, rueful. "You are still so confusing."

He felt tired, so tired.

...Snúðu til baka, elskin mín... Góður vinur, ábyrgð ástkær mín...

Too tired. His fingers dug into the dirt; he struggled to keep his body in an upright position.

"You won't leave?" he asked. He didn't care how childish it sounded.

He was leaving; he could feel himself being drawn back by that voice. It was too soon. There were so many things he needed to say to her, but the energy to do so had been drained from him. He could only fight to hear her response, to squint through his swimming visions to see that smile.
...Taktu hendina mína, og ég skal leíða þig heima.

"I have never left you," Gudrid soothed. Her hand touched his face, cool against his brow.

"No," Hiccup smiled at her fading form. "No, you never did."

"The bow! It's! Is anyone else seeing this?"

"Don't touch it! Remember what happened last time?"

"Oi...look! Look—he's moving!

"Shite, he's alive!"

"Back! All of you back!"

"What was that? What happened?"

"Well done, Thyra. Well done, lass!"

The scent hit him first, more potent than the words that coaxed him from rest. Fragrant and earthy.

"I'm back on the bed again, aren't I?" he whispered, hardly daring to move his lips.

::Ea, yes!::

Hiccup knew he was on a bed because he felt it depress the way only a mattress could when something inordinately heavy climbed on it. The mass dropped down on top of him.

"Umph!"

"Get that thing off him!" boomed his father.

"Leave that thing here," Hiccup coughed out under a groan. A number of gasps rose from the unseen mass of spectators.

"Hiccup!"

Hiccup finally opened his eyes to see Stoick stumble forward and fall to his knees at his bedside. The large man leaned over him, creating a dome of body and beard to block the rest of the world from sight. Hiccup found an unexpected comfort in this, especially as the large, dark mass that was Toothless further concealed him from the ribs down.

"Hiccup—are you—"

"I'm fine," Hiccup said in a stronger voice. "I'm pissed, but I'm fine."

It was evening, the lighting in the home was dim—crap, he was back in the hospice—but even amongst the ambiance Stoick appeared stark white beneath the ring of red hair. His eyes were wide and fearful, his hands wringing against each other to quell their shaking. His reaction to Hiccup's waking was far more exaggerated than the one of yesterday.
Hiccup knew who sent that prayer. And his father knew he knew.

"Will yeh all get the Hel out of here?" Bersi could be heard yelling to the pressing crowd held just at bay beyond his door. "He's fine! He just had a spell—"

"He killed that thing—!"

"Ask him what it was! Does he know what it was?"

"I'll do no such thing! He fell because he was still recoverin'! He over exerted himself 'n' there's nothin' more to it! Now git!"

Bersi's words stung both men. The chief knew, even when he could not see what the girl could see, that Hiccup fell to outside forces. He knew that abomination appeared in their village after his begging to the gods, and that it attacked Hiccup's dragon. Even Stoick the Vast, for all his headstrong and thin-minded tendencies, could read those signs.

Hiccup's eyes had taken on a glacial sheen. His stare bore into Stoick's conscience.

The chief peeked a glance over his shoulder, seeking to ensure some privacy. He couldn't let any who followed him hear what he had to say.

"Second mistake," Stoick said under his breath. "I endangered my entire village because I couldn't leave well enough alone."

"Not sure how in danger the village was," Hiccup replied. Loki was only after one thing, it had seemed.

Looking at Stoick's absolute shame, Hiccup felt more ready to forgive his father than he thought the man deserved. But any forgiveness Stoick should receive depended on one thing.

Hiccup turned his head to face his dragon.

"Toothless, are you okay?"

The dragon's tail flicked across the lower frame of the bed box. He snorted hot air into Hiccup's face and moved his head to rest on the boy's chest.

::My body will heal. You were in the real danger::

And before Hiccup could say anything in response Toothless darted forward and licked the exposed skin of his cheekbone.

"Uack! No! No!" Hiccup moaned helplessly, for Toothless' body weight had trapped his arms under the blankets. "I will have you removed—"

"Hiccup," Stoick called for his attention. His voice was grave and his presence dour, but it did pause Toothless' unwanted attentions.

Hiccup regarded his father with another stony frown.

"Toothless is fine," he stated softly. "And you're lucky. Or I would have been so much angrier than I am right now."

"I know," Stoick said under his breath. "I know, you have every right to be."
"Did you think I would stay here if I lost Toothless? That I'd be able to stomach it?"

"It was never my intention, son, I swear it—"

"I know," Hiccup said shortly.

"If you—" Stoick paused to swallow. His eyes darted to Toothless, whose stare was far more acrid than Hiccup could manage. Hiccup had to give his father credit for keeping so close to them with his face in immediate danger. "Can you tell me anything? Anything at all about what happened to you? Why you fell like you did?"

Hiccup turned his head back toward Toothless; it was the only way he didn't have to look at the chief.

"You got me in trouble," he said to the hanging herbs above. So much trouble. If not for his father he would have never been "sentenced to Midgard", something he had not begun to work out his feelings on. "There are certain things I'm not allowed to... to fire at...and there are consequences for it."

"So that bow—"

"Dad," Hiccup cut him off, "there are a lot of things I feel like I'm not ready to talk with you about. I'm still leaving. I have—there are things I need to do, for myself and for Toothless." He looked back at his father. The man looked fearful of his next words. "I will tell you one day, but there is still so much I have to figure out."

A large part of his mind was in denial about Gudrid's message. His heart demanded that he think of the consequences—of the pain he'll have to endure should he live past everyone he knew, of Loki's attentions and if the god would actively seek to taunt him. He needed to figure out how alive he was and if he could exist in this world without it affecting him as an individual.

"When will you leave?" Stoick asked with quiet resignation.

"As soon as I'm able," Hiccup said, repeating the words he gave Astrid.

"The dragons..."

"Berk should be fine," Hiccup assured him. "The war is over."

Stoick peeked over his shoulder again to make sure no one was near enough to hear.

"This is territory I don't think I can handle," Stoick admitted. "I still have to control myself around the beasts. With them dropping in like this...people are needing guidance. They need time to adjust, methods of taming the beasts. You're good at that...not us."

Against his will, Hiccup's expression softened.

"That's why you have the riders," he said. "Snotlout, Astrid...Fishlegs knows a lot... They're all here to help. I've taught them all they need for foundation but there's still so much I have to learn as well. This is a learning experience...now, where's Framherja?"

The bewilderment on Stoick's face implied that he could not follow the connection in Hiccup's mind. He leaned back and the displacement of his shoulder revealed Framherja, shining and strung and left against the wall by Toothless' volition.
She's restored because you are restored:: Toothless said by way of explanation. As you are her counter part, her condition is relevant to yours::

Hiccup swallowed and turned his attention to the dragon. Toothless' tail continued to flick in annoyance.

"How..."

It seems whenever you pull some crazy stunt that kills you or the like, I get dragged into it too. And turned into a messenger snake::

"Sorry," Hiccup whispered in complete sincerity.

The tail settled.

Don't apologize. They want you to figure that fickle thing out—I want you to. You need to learn control. Consider it another thing to do::

"We have time..." Hiccup muttered with the barest hints of bitterness.

Or, perhaps they had no time at all.

"Time for what?" Stoick asked. It was becoming commonplace to feel out of the loop when in the presence of his boy and the beast.

"Chief," Bersi spoke up. A silence had fallen in the immediate background. The chorus of voices had been pushed outside. "Chief, if you don't mind I'd like to look him over."

"A minute," Stoick spoke up. He lowered his voice again. "Don't leave. Give us a chance."

"I'm not leaving to punish you," Hiccup said, exasperated. "But I can't just... live here. Not any more. Trust me, you wouldn't like me after a month of being grounded. We went over this."

"You're as good at leaving as your mother," said Stoick as his eyes lowered. "She would make the same excuses..."

"Dad, I'm leaving," Hiccup said with finality, because he wouldn't let those words affect his decision. "Why can't you trust me when I say I'll be back?"

"Chief?" Bersi prodded again.

"Because you never wanted to come back," Stoick whispered. "You did because you had a reason."

"I do have a reason," Hiccup whispered back, finally smiling. "You want me back now, which makes all the difference..."

"Chief!" Bersi's voice had turned abrupt.

"...I'll come back here as long as I'm welcome," Hiccup swore.

Stoick's face had gone slack.

"Well, well o'course you're welcome! You're always welcome!"

"Then you have nothing to worry about," smiled Hiccup.
"Chief, really!"

"Like I said," Hiccup breathed as Bersi managed to drag his father away. "I'm not going to disappear."

Bersi shut the door behind Stoick and released a frustrated breath.

"People used to listen to me...Thyra dear, you should be in bed. Come now."

With a start, Hiccup realized that Thyra had been lingering by the furnace. She looked every bit as pale as her father had, amplified by the warm colors flickering within the hearth.

Her father took her by the arm with a gentle hold and began to usher her into a far corner of the room where Hiccup could not see. No doubt where her bed would be.

"Thank you," he said to the læknir just before the man disappeared from view.

Bersi paused where half his face was covered in shadow.

"Thank Thyra," he said. "She sang a galdr to bring you back from wherever you went. She was quite adamant you were in mortal danger, against my diagnosis."

"She..." It was her voice he heard. That heaviness in his body lulling him back to their world...it was her spell.

"Never heard it before," Bersi went on more so to himself. "...Must have learned it from my mother."

A week had passed since the spectacle of Loki's appearance in Berk. Hiccup never told anyone the factual details of that encounter, nor did his father—who only had a slightly better idea than the rest of the village.

Hiccup wasn't wholly sure why he felt he had to abridge and alter everything for the public. Likely, the truth was so terrifying to him that he couldn't imagine trying to share it. He had dealt with disbelief before, accusations of hearsay; he had no desire to experience it again.

His arm had cleared and nearly mended, he walked smoothly on fully healed legs, and Toothless was back to bounding form. Hiccup spent his last days of recovery alternating between forge work, setting up Gobber with a number of blueprints, and repairing Toothless' flying gear. People came to him constantly—children asking for his telling of the Nest Battle, teens demanding he give them flying tips, frazzled adults shrieking at him about the behavior of a dragon and whether it was aggressive or not.

Fishlegs consistently popped up to engage him in dragon-related discussions—which he would have loved had he not had everyone vying for his attention. Apparently the widespread knowledge that he was soon to leave pressured everyone into heckling him.

His father wanted to spend as much time with him as possibly, as if trying to get his fill of Hiccup's presence before an extended absence. Snotlout would needle him for general dragon administration ideas in his own subtle way...which wasn't very subtle at all. Astrid continued to prod at him about the Nest, his plans beyond Berk, the injury on his back (and the amount she had figured out for
herself scared him). He wouldn't answer, of course, but his silence hadn't helped quell her concerns either.

By the time the sun peaked on Tyrsdagr Hiccup was more than happy to be on the road. He stood in the village centre with his bags at his feet and a crowd of well-wishers pressing in on him at a barely-comfortable proximity.

The skies were clear, Toothless was antsy to get in the air, and he had managed to compress all his supplies into three bags. He could have done without the crowd.

"We should have left in the night," Hiccup muttered out of the corner of his mouth.

"I heard that."

A sharp peal and a gust of air were Hiccup's only warning before Chip alighted at his side. Astrid swung down from the saddle, her boots crashing into the hard earth.

Mongrel dropped down next, followed by Rippy and Fidget. Their riders dismounted just as Fishlegs came spinning by on a Gronkle.

"Wh-wh-whoa!"

The blur of brown and blonde careened into a high pile of stacked firewood reserved for the braizers. Logs tumbled down on them with a great crash that startled several dragons in the air.

:::Amateurs::: Toothless snorted. The dragon was moving onto irritation with how long they had been in the village square saying goodbye to anyone who wished to see them off.

"Be nice," Hiccup pleaded. He called to the cloud of settling dust, "You okay Fish?"

A large arm popped out of the fallen wood.

"I'm okay," Fishlegs gasped. "I'm okay—are you okay? Yes, yes, okay, you're fine..."

The Gronkle, which had risen from a mound of steepled logs, shook its warty hide to shower Fishlegs with flittering bark and buzzed off to the shade of a nearby barn.

Fishlegs watched it go and sighed.

"Alright, we'll work on landing later..." he muttered as he tromped over to the group.

Hiccup grinned at him, at all of them.

"I thought you guys weren't going to say goodbye," he remarked.

He had, in fact, experienced the passing fear that his old classmates would not show for his send off—a send off his father insisted he get. There were only a handful of people he really cared about saying farewell to and they were among them. They had bonded in their time of learning from him, in those days before the Nest Battle and after. He got to know them as people, not as names and faces. On the whole they were still offensive, still capable of tormenting, but he saw them for their merits as well as their flaws, and he could no longer label them as childhood bullies.

"We thought about it," Ruffnut started.

"But we really wanted you to see Fishlegs on his Gronkle," Tuffnut ended with a snicker.
"Shut up," Fishlegs muttered.

"Which is a prime example of why you should stick around," Astrid said in a manner that told Hiccup she was trying to keep the twins from picking on Fishlegs, but only ended in Fishlegs hanging his head further.

"You're as bad as my father," Hiccup muttered.

"I think it'll be good if he left," Snotlout piped up. He received several looks ranging from annoyance to bewilderment. "No—not like—I'm just saying this is the perfect opportunity for us to see how well we can work out from under your shadow."

"Under my shadow?" Hiccup repeated dryly. He shared a look with Toothless.

:::I respect his grasp on reality::: said the Night Fury.

"I'm sure you do," Hiccup chuckled.

"What are you saying?" Tuffnut exclaimed, offense written all over his upturned features. Snotlout slapped a hand onto the blond's shoulder.

"No, man, think about it. He leaves, he comes back, and we're all so much better than him—uh, no offense Hiccup."

Hiccup waved a hand. "None taken."

Toothless had taken to kneading the earth with his claws. The dragon was growing impatient.

"They need your help more than they're willing to admit," Astrid said, taking care for them to hear her.

"We do not!" Snotlout barked.

"We totally have this," Tuffnut crowed.

"What about the new dragons that come here?" Fishlegs asked. "We won't know how to ride them or the best saddles for them—"

"I'm not going to hold your hands through this," Hiccup deadpanned. Why would he know any better? "You'll be fine."

"I think," Ruffnut cut in. "What they're trying to say is that they'll miss you."

All five of the young adults stared at her. She placed her hands on her waist and jutted her hip.

"What?" she asked, defensive. "I can read a situation."

Hiccup blinked twice and turned to Fishlegs.

"You guys are going have your hands full, I'm not saying you won't, but you're as prepared as you can get," he assured them. "It's trial and error from here on out. You know how to communicate with dragons on a basic level, people will listen to you, and—"

"Hiccup! Do yeh have enough furs?" Stoick called over to him. Gobber was doing his best to distract the anxious father but Stoick was persistent in getting Hiccup's attention.
"Yes, dad," Hiccup sighed.

"Did you bring a change of under-linens too?" Dogsbreath cackled as he passed.

Hiccup shook his head. Some things would never change.

Unhearing to Stoick or Dogsbreath, Tuffnut jammed a thumb to his chest.

"Well just know that I won't be sitting on my ass. I'm leading the first dragon-back hunting expedition for the winter," he boasted.

"I'll be getting married," Ruffnut offered with a shrug. Her mannerisms were nonchalant, but Hiccup caught her sneak a glance to the wharf where her husband chased a couple terrors from the daily catch. A smile turned her face, slight yet wolfish. "Gotta break in a man."

"Oh, that's disgusting," Tuffnut wretched. "Oh, I'm going to be sick. So sick..."

"I'm going to go on a flying expedition," Fishlegs exclaimed over Tuffnut's moaning. He had a nervous excitement in his flushed, shining face. Hiccup thought he might have just gotten permission. "Next spring, I'll have my Gronkle trained and I'll be collecting data to compose a new dragon book."

"I'll be going with him," Astrid stated.

Fishlegs froze. "What? You are? The chief said so?"

Astrid blew a lock of hair from eyes. Hiccup saw them dart to Chip. The dragon cocked its head.

"He will," she said with absolute confidence.

Hiccup snorted.

"Well someone has to make sure he doesn't get killed!" Astrid said hotly.

Fishlegs' eyebrows rose. "I'm not going to get killed! I have Horrorcow and that Gronkle."

"She's right," Hiccup interjected. His eyes met with Astrid's and he knew—he saw what he suspected had always been there: impatience, a desire to prove herself in these new circumstances, the search for an excuse to get off the island—even if just to avoid falling victim to her culture. "It's not just dangerous dragons you'll be encountering. There are dangerous people, dangerous creatures...pretty much everything is dangerous."

"I..." Fishlegs looked less confident. "There are?"

Hiccup smiled, just barely catching Astrid's grateful look.

"I can't tell you how many times I almost died...even with Toothless around."

Said dragon sent him a sharp look.

::Well you certainly didn't make it easy:: he said with a scathing undertone.

The corner of Hiccup's mouth lifted. "Just keeping you on your toes."

::Can we go now?:: Toothless threw in.
Hiccup had just started a slow nod when Snotlout butted in.

"I'll be taking over the village," he said with an air more boastful than Tuffnut.

"Say that a little louder—maybe chief Stoick will hear you," Ruffnut sniped.

Hiccup held out a hand. Snotlout stared at it, at a loss.

"I'm saying goodbye, chief," Hiccup explained with a rough grin.

::Finally!:: Toothless crowed as he hopped to attention.

Snotlout hesitated a moment longer; he likely expected Hiccup to be insincere. After a bout of hesitation he stretched his hand forward and accepted Hiccup's shake.

"Oh gods, don't encourage him," Astrid pleaded under her breath.

Snotlout ignored her.

"Bye, then," he said.

"Bye man!" Tuffnut bid. He now had the courage to give Hiccup a hard knock on the back.

::Let's go! Let's go!: Toothless started to bounce on the spot.

Ruffnut stepped up next and said: "Bring us stuff."

Hiccup leaned back.

"Uh..."

Before he could think of a response, Fishlegs took Hiccup's forearm for a quick, firm grip.

"Maybe I'll run into you while you're out there," the larger man suggested.

"We'll," Astrid corrected. "Maybe we'll run into you out there. You don't want to fend for yourself out there by yourself, Fish. We both know this—"

"But—" Fishlegs began.

"You don't," Astrid said, and there would be no arguing. Satisfied, she turned to Hiccup. "Take care of yourself out there."

Her arm jerked as though she thought about offering a handshake, but instead brought both to cross in front of her chest.

"I will," he promised.

"And...I hope you figure out whatever you think you need to find out there," she added, appearing slightly uncomfortable with the words.

Hiccup's smile softened. "You too."

Toothless hopped for attention.

::That's all of them. Let's go::

Hiccup moved closer to Toothless while shouldering his carrying bag. His mannerisms caught the attention of anyone within eyeshot.

Stoick jerked at the sight of his boy so close to take off.

"Hiccup!"

Toothless released an underlying growl that had those closest to him stepping back in alarm.

::When will it end?:: he moaned with dramatics he could have only picked up from his rider.

Hiccup rubbed the dragon's head. "Last one, I prom—"

His father had pulled him into a hug Hiccup hadn't been expecting. It was brief but tight and it left him stunned. The next thing Hiccup knew, Stoick was holding him at arms length. He eyed his son from top to bottom, memorizing the man he saw now.

Stoick gave Hiccup two simple instructions.

"Be safe. Come back."

Hiccup was spared from coming up with an immediate response by Toothless' annoyed input.

::Does he think I'll let you die out there?::

"Dad, you're offending, Toothless."

Stoick dropped his arms from Hiccup's shoulders and stared at the dragon.

"I'm...sorry?"

A kind smile came to Hiccup's face, one he couldn't help. A part of him was still very upset with his father for his ignorant and desperation-induced choice of action. But he tried; he really did. And he cared, which meant the world to Hiccup.

"I'll be safe," he vowed, much as he did to Astrid. "And I'll come back."

"You swear it?" Stoick urged.

"Two years," Hiccup decided. "I'll drop by in two years and see how you're doing."

Stoick nodded. "Seems a bit long...but I'll take it."

A new pair of helmet horns popped up from behind Stoick as someone approached them.

Hiccup's smile widened.

"Bye Gobber."

"Damn you," the blacksmith griped. "That's all I'll say to yeh. Damn. You."

"You'll be fine," Hiccup droned, knowing exactly what had Gobber in such a foul mood.

Gobber's mustache swung as he spewed his frustrations. "I'll never see the light of day! I'll be in that forge till the end of my days 'n' all because you had to bring dragons in as patrons!"

"You need to get a new—" Hiccup stopped, turned to his father and said, "You need to get him a
new apprentice."

"Oi!" Gobber exclaimed.

"I will," Stoick promised.

Toothless took hold of Hiccup's tunic with his teeth and yanked.

::Let's go!::

Hiccup stumbled back from the pull and just managed to catch himself. Chuckles arose from onlookers.

"Alright, alright..."

He pressed his left palm into the saddle and used it to direct his body into the seat when he jumped up.

People called to him with their parting graces and well wishing. Hiccup wiggled his foot into the snug steering stirrup, checked Framherja for security, and tightened his knees around Toothless' ribs.

"Okay," he breathed for Toothless' ears. "I'm ready."

::It's about time:: Toothless commented, but there was nothing scathing left in his words. Both of the boys were filled with the same tingling anticipation a new adventure brought to them. The air tasted sweeter when they knew it wouldn't be breathed for so long, and their hearts sang for possibilities they couldn't predict.

Toothless' rear end wiggled a little with a juvenile thrill just before he launched from Berk's dirt.

Whoops and cheers followed them as Toothless' wings caught winds filled with the villagers' calls and they ascended into the air with soaring spirits.

"Hiccup!"

::I'm not turning around!:: Toothless stated, still climbing—though, he did slow some.

Hiccup never expected him to anyway. He swiveled in his seat, one hand gripping the saddle's rim for security, and looked down.

"Hiccup!" Thyra called again with hands cupped around her mouth.

Hiccup waved at her. He felt slightly bad he couldn't give her a more generous farewell. She had played an active role in his treatment.

Perhaps it was with great fortune that Hiccup was very far from the ground when the tail end of her words reached him.

"When you come back I'm going to marry you!"

"Wait—what?"

Hiccup did a double take back to the rapidly shrinking village, where the sound of his friends' laughter strived to reach their altitude. He couldn't make out faces anymore, and he took comfort in knowing they couldn't make out his because he was slack-jawed and gaping and positive he had heard wrong. She was barely ten!
Toothless chortled in his very human way of laughing.

::She is a vision seeker, isn't she::

Hiccup felt more flummoxed with each passing moment.

"She—no—she only sees the present—"

::She is kin to the vördr. That has to count for something::

Hiccup resisted the urge to slap Toothless' earfins.

"You're ruining my good exit!"

::They can't see us anymore:: Toothless pointed out.

Berk had faded from sight. The air was crisp in the prevailing winter and Hiccup knew it would only get colder as they moved north. Within a day they would no longer see green. Just ice and blue and, with any luck, Night Furies.

"That's not the point," Hiccup griped. "You ruined it for me."

::I didn't ruin it. That child did::

Hiccup cringed. "Yeah, about that...maybe we should wait until she's actually married before we show up again."

::A promise is a promise. Two of your years, exactly::

Hiccup shrugged, determined not to let Toothless rattle him.

"Who knows how long we'll be kept up once we find your drove..."

::There is nothing in my drove that will 'keep us up'::

"I'm going to find that lady-fury."

::I'm going to cut your hair::

"I shaved! Isn't that enough?"

The bickering continued until they had to stop for food. They were back to hunting and cooking for themselves, the rough and simple lives that first brought them together. Hiccup sat with his notebook and Toothless lolled in the sun. They reveled about the times when this was their everyday life, and both looked forward to continuing with their old routine as they moved farther and farther from human settlements.

Hiccup didn't know where they would end up after two years, if they would make it back to Berk or if he would be sidetracked by fate's guiding hand. If he would be otherwise engaged by something important or ensnared by misfortune.

He did know that he would face challenges in the future; he knew that he could never fully conform to human society so long as his loyalty went to Toothless, he knew that his heart would break should he outlive those he cared about, and he knew he had to find balance.

Above all, Hiccup knew that, for all the divine intervention and manipulations and insights to the
worlds beyond his own, his future was as much a mystery to him as the day he shot down Toothless. He would have to get by day to day just as anyone else would.

This wasn't the time to worry about when Ragnarök would come or his demise or about Loki. Nor was it the time to fret over what the gods expected of him. So long as he had Toothless at his side and time in his hands, Hiccup would fulfill every responsibility and meet every obstacle head on. Just at his own pace.

This was his time to see the world, to find balance in his life, to find a place among humans without compromising the life he had come to love. This was a new life; regardless of how the gods expected him to live it, it was still his. This was a life with family and support. This was a future of opportunity.

This was the Beginning.

Chapter End Notes

Forty Chapter Epic is finished, and here I will place the same note I gave to my FFnet readers:

This fic became what it was because I got more into it than I ever could have anticipated—and that only happened because of the readers. The thoughtful reviews, the way readers read more deeply into the plot than even I did often lead to more depth on the story's behalf. Questions were posed that had me having to hash out my own subconscious reasoning to answer them. The readers kept reminding me—even if unintentional—of past mentioning's I needed to bring up again.

This wasn't an easy story to write. It started at a period in the movie where several characters were unstable. I wrote characters how they were in the film—not how I wanted them to be, but how they *were*—and developed them from there; I didn't always like the way I had to make them behave, but I was striving for reality above personal satisfaction. I won't apologize for it either. I'm proud of those characters, as am I I'm proud of this story.

As for its ending:

Hiccup is still learning to define himself as an individual. Both he and Toothless are so young and so raw to me because I have this universe ingrained in my mind now; I know the sort of men (er, and dragons) they are meant to become. I don't see their characters as final or adults. They're children to me, open to experience and influence and capable of so much more than we've seen.

Writing this story has been an amazing experience and I'm so grateful I got to share it with such an amazing fandom.

Thank you.
Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!