Seven fifty a month. Average rent for a one-bedroom in downtown Berk runs about eleven hundred a month if you don’t want to live above a club or a subway station or dog kennel, which Astrid doesn’t, so she’s willing to deal with a lot for this seven fifty a month. But a lot, even as a vague concept, still has boundaries. Boundaries that loom ever closer with every kitchen cabinet she opens to find bare and empty space instead of bed bugs or black mold or a secretly cemented in shrine to Tom Brady or Cthulhu.

The closet isn’t a walk-in, but it’s clean, and the landlord will let her set her own rent schedule. Hell, it’s quiet because neighbors both up and downstairs are renting on airbnb from out of state, so she basically has this whole side of the building to herself. Most of her few boxes are almost fully unpacked when she finally starts to come around to the idea that sometimes when things seem too good to be true, it might just be because they are that good.

And that’s when the bright red laser dot appears on the light fixture on the kitchen ceiling.
Chapter 1

Seven fifty a month. Average rent for a one-bedroom in downtown Berk runs about eleven hundred a month if you don’t want to live above a club or a subway station or dog kennel, which Astrid doesn’t, so she’s willing to deal with a lot for this seven fifty a month. But a lot, even as a vague concept, still has boundaries. Boundaries that loom ever closer with every kitchen cabinet she opens to find bare and empty space instead of bed bugs or black mold or a secretly cemented in shrine to Tom Brady or Cthulhu.

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“…there!” A voice shouts from the courtyard below the kitchen window and Astrid crosses the room just in time to see a silent but flashing police car pull up at the curb and illuminating a small group of people surrounding the person pointing the laser up through the fog. “Aaaand we’ve got to go!”

The shouting person starts to run, patting the hood of the cop car and flailing to catch a hat that falls off of their head as the rest of the group shuffles behind, giggling nervously.

Ok, a few drunks in the courtyard, that’s what’s to be expected for seven fifty a month. It’s a catch, but a manageable one, Astrid will just have to order some blackout curtains when her first paycheck hits, that’s not too big of a deal. She watches the cop car turn off its lights and the cop in the front seat waves in her direction, a welcome to the neighborhood that she really doesn’t want, and she closes the crappy mass produced blinds that only sort of block the view.

The cop car leaves, eventually, and she starts unloading books onto the lone Ikea bookcase that kind of fits between the couch and bedroom door. She has to be at her advisor’s office first thing in the morning, but she won’t be able to focus if she doesn’t have some semblance of a home setup to come home to and books on a shelf are the easiest way to do that. Even so, the apartment is more of a mess than when she started when she gives up for the night and starts brushing her teeth.

The laser pointer appears again, reflecting off of her bathroom mirror and glowing dimly in her dingy kitchen light fixture.

“…there, I think I’ve got it, not a great angle from here, but approximately right under that light, on the second story is where Elizabeth Smith died.”

Astrid whips open the bathroom window, fumbling her toothbrush as she does and dropping it onto what sounds like the same idiot as earlier.

“What the fuck?”

Her toothpaste spatters an arc across a stupid looking top hat, of all things, as a skinny guy looks up and freezes, staring at her out of a pale face for a second before clicking the laser pointer off. The crowd around him laughs, not nearly embarrassed or startled enough for the revelation that apparently Astrid’s apartment is cheap because some woman died in her living room. They
shouldn’t be laughing about that.

“Your apartment was empty,” the guy wipes his hat on his long black coat and takes a few halting steps back towards the sidewalk.

“Now it’s not!” Astrid growls, wiping toothpaste off of her mouth with the back of her hand. That was a new electric toothbrush head and those things aren’t cheap except oh, that doesn’t matter, because someone died in her living room and no one told her.

“Noted!” The guy nods, replacing his smudged top hat and ushering the small group of stupid drunks behind him.

A gust of wind and creaking tree branches make Astrid jump and the window slams shut, barely avoiding her fingertips.

“Fuck,” she swears under her breath, hugging her stomach and staring at the light fixture in the next room. “No. I’m not going to get freaked out about this. Just because some drunk idiot has privacy issues doesn’t mean anyone died here.” Her feet drag the first couple of forced steps into the living room where she sits on the couch and picks up her phone, hovering over the landlord’s number for a second.

Gobber said to text anytime. If it were a plumbing emergency or she had found bedbugs or Patriots paraphernalia in the cabinets, she wouldn’t hesitate, but if she says something now, it feels like she’s scared for no reason.

Unless it’s not no reason. It could be a healthcode violation, she might need to argue for a pre-move in professional cleaning in her lease. That should really be in all the lease paperwork. She’s doing Gobber a legal service when she texts him, really, she’s not scared or even that perturbed.

Astrid (10:37pm): Who is Elizabeth Smith?

It’s ambiguous enough that if there’s no truth to this, Gobber should debunk it pretty quickly. He seemed like a stand-up guy, or at least decently direct if the way he shrugged off helping her move in with a laughing wave of his prosthetic arm is any indication.

Landlord Gobber (10:39pm): You heard about that, did you?

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Astrid scrolls through her phone to Ruffnut’s contact and calling her. “Pick up, pick up, pick up.”

“Hello?” Ruffnut is somewhere loud and she sounds about as drunk as Laser Pointer asshole must have been.

“You have to come over to my new apartment, right now.”

“I thought we were getting lunch tomorrow.”

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“I thought we were getting lunch tomorrow.”

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“Someone died here.” Astrid doesn’t need to give any other means of explanation because Ruffnut asks for the address and says she’ll be here in ten. She’s knocking on the front door in eight and Astrid opens to see her holding a small shovel, the kind designed to keep in the trunk of cars for digging out of the snow. “I don’t have a car.”

“I know, that’s why I already over-tipped my Uber driver, they’re waiting downstairs,” Ruffnut stumbles inside, giving Astrid a one-armed hug that would be anti-climactic after so long apart if it weren’t for the other circumstances. “You said something about a body?”
“What?” Astrid looks at the light fixture then Ruffnut’s shovel, eyes widening. “There’s no body here now—“

“You said someone died here, what was I supposed to think?”

“That at some point in time, someone died in my apartment, not that I needed your help hiding a body.” Astrid yanks the door shut and turns on the light, shuddering again. What if it fell on whoever Elizabeth Smith was? What if this apartment is so cheap because the shoddy wiring literally has a death count?

“Do I get any points for not asking if they deserved it?” Ruffnut looks around, adjusting her grip on the short shovel, “because if you had killed someone, they definitely would have deserved it.”

“You’re ridiculous,” Astrid shuts the door, “I didn’t even kill the asshole shining a laser pointer into my apartment, I just threw my toothbrush at him.”

“What?”

“It’s a long story.” She sighs and tugs at her braid, struggling to reconcile the fact that she moved in today. It was just last night she turned in the keys to her old, awful roommate and loaded her last boxes into the van and now, less than twenty four hours later, she’s dealing with a new apartment that might be a crime scene. “And a long day. Have you ever heard of Elizabeth Smith?”

“Should I ask John Doe?” Ruffnut points over her shoulder, “and should I go tell the Uber driver to shut his trunk?”

“I’ll come with you, there’s a liquor store down the block.”

They don’t talk much on the way to get a bottle of wine. Astrid almost worries about her own expression because it’s not like Ruffnut to tread lightly and no one grows up or changes that much in two years. She’s relieved when they get back and Ruffnut bowls through her hesitation, practically snatching her front door keys away and unlocking the door.

“So you never answered, are we looking for a ghost named Jane Johnson or whatever?”

“I have no idea,” Astrid opens the silverware drawer where she threw her mismatched set of cutlery earlier and thankfully finds her corkscrew, “you know what? No, I’m—I shouldn’t have called you, I’m just going to look it up, what’s my problem?”

“I don’t know what your problem is, that’s why I keep asking.”

“Elizabeth Smith, Berk, 324 Harbor Road,” Astrid types into her searchbar as she takes a swig of wine out of the bottle and hands it absently to Ruffnut, who does the same.

“You are awfully close to the harbor, aren’t you?” Ruffnut hauls herself up to sit on the kitchen counter, “I bet it’s going to smell like fish all morning, is that how you can afford it?”

“…and here, right above this courtyard, on a winter’s night in eighteen hundred and eighty three —“

The whisper-yell sends a thrill of anger and a wave of residually embarrassed fear through Astrid’s chest as she throws open the kitchen window to see another small group of drunks huddled in their coats around a toothpaste stained top hat.

“What is your problem?” She shouts and the guy freezes.
“What is going on?” Ruffnut jostles for a view of the window.

“And the apartment on the second story is still very active today,” the guy announces before hurrying off towards the gate, laser pointer bouncing off of a window across the street, “we’ll go to the site of the second murder—“

“Second murder?” Astrid calls after the group of stupid, trespassing drunks as they follow the idiot posing as a fancy Victorian trespasser, but no one answers and she slams the window shut with a scowl.

“Elizabeth Smith?” Ruffnut takes Astrid’s phone from the counter and scrolls through the search, “do you know anything about Viggo Grimborn, the Harbor Street Killer?”

“Is he a moron masquerading around in a top hat at…twelve forty eight in the morning?” Astrid’s knees shake with sudden onset exhaustion, which has a single treatment, which is wine out of the bottle even though it’s past midnight and she has to be at work in seven hours.

“No, the Harbor Street Killer, the one that’s inspired like…ok, more than a couple Johnny Depp characters, I’m not even going to list them. The famous one. Holy shit, Elizabeth Smith was his first victim.”

“Wait,” Astrid sits on the floor, cross-legged clutching the wine, “the one with that documentary?”

“Yeah, the one that filmed a few years ago, there was that cute camera guy,” Ruffnut nods, “my brother got really into it for a while, he had some theory that it was Theodore Roosevelt or something, I can get him to bring over his binder thingy.”

“No that’s—“

“Dossier!” She lays on the floor, head on Astrid’s leg, “that’s what he kept calling it. He’d totally bring it over.”

“No, don’t invite him,” Astrid takes her phone back before Tuffnut can be instructed to bring a compendium of his surely logical theories to the party. “I just have to do some research.” She wrings her hands, “tomorrow, after I sleep in the apartment where Viggo Grimborn killed someone. Apparently.”

Astrid isn’t going to explicitly ask Ruffnut to stay, but she doesn’t kick her out either. Ruffnut’s snoring is kind of a safety blanket, a white noise that Astrid is long accustomed to studying or sleeping through after four long years as college roommates, and Astrid doesn’t realize she fell asleep on the floor, underneath the infamous light fixture, until her alarm is going off before sunrise the next morning.

The same muscle memory that let Ruffnut’s snores carry her peacefully to sleep now inspires her to smack Ruffnut awake with a pillow as she stumbles to the bathroom to start getting ready. The bathroom where there is no toothbrush because it’s on the ground outside, fully frosted over next to what Astrid imagines to be a stupid looking top hat shadow. As always, the anger comes first, riding on a blanket of irritation. She was ready to find all kinds of ridiculous things after accepting an apartment with such monumentally cheap rent, but some idiot with a laser pointer making a triplicate pilgrimage to annoy her wasn’t on the agenda.

She checks her phone to see if her landlord ever explained his monumentally helpful and not at all ominous text, and when she sees that he hasn’t, she pries further.

Astrid (7:04am): From a lunatic in the courtyard three times last night
She’ll regret the sass later. Or more like after payday when she can afford another electric toothbrush.

“Did Johnny Depp kill us in our sleep?” Ruffnut hangs around the door, wiping smudged mascara off of her cheek and reaching for Astrid’s stopgap mouthwash to swish some around her cheeks.

“Not that I’m aware of,” Astrid stares at her reflection in the dingy mirror for a second. The slightly dark bags under her eyes are leftover from her last job’s hours and the move and they only worsened the night before, but exhaustion only magnifies determination. She’s going to get to the bottom of this. And by this she means her apartment and the laser pointed wielding, top hat wearing asshole who brought its flaws to her attention.

It’s not a great goal to start a new grad fellowship with, so maybe it’s a good thing that her advisor is out through the end of the week. A blonde guy who introduces himself as Fishlegs hands over her laptop and gives her a brief, but oddly in depth tour of the criminal archives before showing her to her desk. It takes a couple of hours to check her class and work schedules and then she’s stuck sitting.

Sitting and researching.

Pertinent things like ongoing studies in her department. It’s not intentional when she clicks a few footnotes and ends up looking at a dissertation on the Harbor Street Killer, where Elizabeth Smith is mentioned on the first page. Five times in the document, in fact.

Landlord Gobber (12:10pm): don’t call the cops, I’ll talk to him

Astrid (12:12pm): The Harbor Street Killer?

She capitalizes because it feels significant. Or maybe because she wants it to feel significant. Being scared of all capital letters is different than being scared of lower case, not that she was scared at all. Tired and addled, maybe, but not scared.

Of course her landlord doesn’t answer, why would he for seven fifty a month, and it’s not like she has anything to do so she starts searching. She expects the first page to be articles or even adaptations, like Ruffnut had mentioned, but most of the promotional links are for tours. Walking tours, bus tours, one Segway tour.

“Find anything interesting?” Fishlegs interrupts Astrid’s thoughts with a tired chuckle, “I wish I had a day here with nothing to do.” He gestures to the stacks of books and records around them and Astrid nods.

“Yeah, it’s a great collection.” She hasn’t found anything other than fodder for the world’s creepiest staycation in her new city, but Fishlegs doesn’t have to know that.

“We have every Berk Times back through seventeen ninety five.” He brags, thumbing along a yellowed stack of pages, “if you need help finding anything—”

“Anything on the Harbor Street Killer?” It falls out, weighted by lack of sleep and careless curiosity and Astrid bites her lip to keep from saying anything else.

“The Harbor Street Killer?” He rolls his eyes, “don’t tell me you’re one of those.”

“Oh, I’m not,” Astrid scoffs, “I just…I think one of these tours I found online intersected my new apartment last night. A few times, actually.”
“Try going to the Ripped Tavern after work,” Fishlegs sits down at his own desk, “after happy hour, prices double for the tourist crowd.”

“That sucks,” Astrid nods, commiserating even as she looks up the tavern in association with the Harbor Street Killer. There are about five different tours that meet there between four in the afternoon and one in the morning, like there’s an entire industry based on the murder that apparently happened in Astrid’s apartment.

“Just because Johnny Depp–”

“Right,” she cuts him off, “shouldn’t ruin happy hour. I get it.”

Fishlegs nods and starts muttering to himself over some file, his social interaction quota for the day evidently met. Astrid texts Ruffnut to meet her at the Ripped Tavern after work.

She gets there a little before seven and orders a half pint to have an excuse to sit and watch the crowd. It transitions quickly from college students and office workers from nearby buildings to people holding maps and giggling over the same hushed name. Viggo Grimborn. The first tour guide she sees is obvious, because the woman is wearing an extravagant hat and carrying a sign that says ‘Berserker Tours, 7:15pm’. A small group congregates quickly around her and she checks names off of a list before clearing her throat and starting in on a practiced lecture.

“Viggo Grimborn, the most famous murderer who was never caught.” She gives the crowd around her a second to giggle, “over the next two hours, we’re going to visit important locations relevant to both the six murders most commonly attributed to Grimborn and the case pursuing him, but also one actual murder location.”

The front door of the tavern opens, a gust of cutting wind drawing Astrid’s attention as she reflexively looks for Ruffnut, and instead sees a tall guy adjusting a bulging messenger bag over his shoulder. But his bag isn’t what gets her attention, it’s his face, or more specifically the way that he looks at the woman in the hat starting her tour and rolls his eyes. He gives the crowd gathered around her a wide berth, gait uneven from the heavy bag as he makes his way to a table in the back corner and starts flicking through a thick file.

He’s cute, not that Astrid cares. That’s not even why she’s looking at him, it’s his expressions that are holding her attention. He seems to be trying very hard to ignore the tour beginning in the opposite corner of the tavern but keeps reacting anyway, mouth twisting into a mocking grimace when the tour guide says something about her theories about Grimborn’s true identity. When the tour group finally makes its way outside he rolls green eyes again, cheeks puffing out as he shakes his head and leans further over his file, tongue peeking out of the corner of his mouth in evident concentration.

“Hey,” Ruffnut startles her, plopping down across the table and taking a sip of Astrid’s beer without asking. “Sorry, traffic. Did I miss anything?”

"Not really,” Astrid resists the urge to look at her fellow reasonable person judging the next tour that’s congregating by the bar, because Ruffnut’s eagle eyes would catch onto something that’s not there and get distracted, “just a Viggo Grimborn murder tour leaving with a different hat wearing weirdo than the one shining laser pointers into my apartment.”

“Really? Is this like…a thing? Don’t tell Tuff that I owe him an apology for saying he’s the only idiot on earth who cares about some hundred year old murder.” She looks around and wrinkles her nose, “oh my god, they’re selling merchandise.”
Astrid follows her eyeline to a row of tee shirts displayed above the bar and wrinkles her nose, “murder commemoration clothes. Great.”

“So what’s the plan here?” Ruffnut rubs her hands together, “are we going on a nerdy tour or…”

“If I’m going to see that top hat wearing weirdo anywhere, I figure it’ll be here.”

“So we’re looking for the top hat weirdo,” Ruffnut leans her chin on her hand and nods slowly, “what are you going to do when you find him? Do I need to get that Uber driver back here and find some secluded woods or…”

“I don’t know,” Astrid shrugs. She hasn’t thought that far ahead, which isn’t necessarily something she’s used to. A lot about this move has been spur of the moment and while she can’t say it’s comfortable, she doesn’t really know how to backtrack at this point.

“Well…you might want to think fast on that.” Ruff points over Astrid’s shoulder and before Astrid can call out her overwhelming lack of subtlety, she sees what—or who—she’s pointing at.

There’s a toothpaste stained top hat on the table next to the file, and the guy who she’d stupidly thought to be reasonable is pulling a long, antique looking coat out of his bag and shrugging into it. The sign propped on his table says ‘The Real Viggo Grimborn tour, 7:30pm’.
The seven-thirty tour is always the hardest. It’s a little better in winter, when it’s decisively past dusk and Hiccup isn’t stuck trying to frame a desolate Victorian slum while children eat ice cream and laugh in front of that stupid frozen yogurt shop they put up where the mouth of Breakneck Alley used to be, effectively making the walk to the third murder site twice as long. But even in winter, even with the Ripped tavern playing saloon music that some idiot thinks is accurate to the period to set the mood, the seven-thirty tour is always a little slower to go along with the mystery. By the nine-thirty tour, usually enough people are drunk to fall for a couple of cheap scares, and fewer wannabe academics like to be out that late past their bedtime.

The eleven thirty-tour is always best, the few old stone walls that are left seem to breathe in the fog and moonlight, telling their sides of the story and drawing everyone too close. The eleven thirty-tour is where people ask questions in a whisper before feeling silly and forcing themselves to speak louder, only to jump back at the echo. It makes less money, but it’s when he does his best thinking, when he feels most surrounded by the mystery.

The seven-thirty tour also sucks because the first Berserker tour moved from seven to seven-fifteen two weeks ago and now Hiccup has to hear his evidence crammed into crowd-pleasing theories that don’t make any sense, just because answers are worth more to some people than questions.

‘The Real Viggo Grimborn Tour’ was petty. Hiccup knows that, and it probably wouldn’t work for legal reasons if he tried to officially register it with anyone, but as long as he’s running off of an unofficial blog and taking cash only, he’s sticking with it. Sure, it draws the stodgy, academic types, but if he deals with their questions for one tour, they actually buy his book and he’s not turning down that self-publishing check. Especially since every store in a half mile radius of his apartment except the Whole Foods has finally been squeezed out.

He buttons up his coat, checking the photo order in his file one more time and brushing at the toothpaste stain on the top of his hat. Using a Tide pen on an antique hat felt dirty, so he’s going to have to figure out something else later. Especially since the white smudge is probably making him a more obvious nighttime target to some pretty good aim.

It’s not the first time he’s had something thrown at him since he started doing this, but it is the first time anything left a mark. He hopes that the girl in that apartment hasn’t had any time to stock up on heavier projectiles. Gobber said he’d talk to her, but it’s Gobber, that could be anything from ‘leave him alone’ to ‘do you want to borrow my paintball gun?’.

There’s no time to worry about that though, because it’s seven-twenty-eight and the bar is starting to fill up, so he sets the hat on his head and clears his throat.

“Anyone ready for The Real Viggo Grimborn Tour, think twice, because you might not be as ready as you think!” He announces over the din and it quiets for a second as maybe ten people get to their feet and move towards his table. It’s close to the secondary exit into the alley by the fourth site, which is a way better start to the tour than walking down a practically modern main street out front. With the size of Berserker tour groups, it would never work, which is just another reason he’s glad to be on his own now.

“Do we need a reservation or some shit?” A blonde asks from two tables over, wide grin on an angular face as she links her arm through her friend’s and pulls. Her friend is not smiling, glaring even, and Hiccup blinks at her for a second, forgetting the question.
She’s not just pretty, that’s not the right word for it. Pretty girls tend to make him louder, more animated, vying even harder for the scare or the laugh, but she’s way more than pretty. She’s furious and familiar, like divine intervention dropped her here to intimidate him into awkward silence.

“Huh?” He shakes his head, shoving the hat on and idly taking a ten-dollar bill from a serious looking man with a tattered fictionalized Grimborn history that Hiccup hates for getting so damn popular, despite how wrong everything about it is.

“Do we need a reservation for the tour?” The happy blonde pulls her friend to her feet and fights stubbornly dragging heels to take a step towards him. “It’s a tour about those old murders or whatever, right?”

“Viggo Grimborn,” he nods, pointing at the sign, “most people who care about a tour at least know his name.”

“Oh, we know his name.” The gorgeous, angry one is cryptic as she narrows her eyes and takes a reluctant step forward. “You didn’t answer, do we need a reservation?”

“Nope,” Hiccup takes another bill from a woman on behalf of her family, two older teenagers giggling at each other and looking around the bar, “no reservation, just meet at the bar like it says on my website.”

“Your website. Right.” Her teeth clip the words and she crosses her arms, glancing at her friend.

“How much?” Her friend laughs but it does nothing to dissolve the glare, “Astrid, this is hilarious, we have to.”

“The sign says cash only, Ruff,” Astrid’s jaw twitches as she looks between his sign and his face again, still furious, still mysterious, still uninterested. Stubborn enough to spark that urge to teach and show and explain that got Hiccup doing these tours in the first place. “I have no cash.”

“That’s fine,” he blurs, face going hot when her glare turns fully to him, “how about this, pay me at the end if it’s worth it.”

“Oh, it’ll be worth it,” Ruff laughs a little too hard for the exchange, keeping her arm firmly linked through Astrid’s like she expects her to run or lunge or something. Judging by Astrid’s expression, the second seems more likely, and Hiccup wonders what kind of bad idea this is, exactly.

Five minutes later, when the group is a little more than ten and people have stopped approaching him, he’s more than ready to figure out, leading the way out the side door and into the dark alleyway. The teenagers cling giggling to their mother’s arms and the man tucks his stupid, inaccurate book into his coat pocket, at least temporarily. It’ll come out again, they always do.

“Starting in the winter of eighteen hundred and eighty-three and proceeding through the summer of eighteen eighty-four, the killer now known as Viggo Grimborn committed at least four, but possibly up to six of the most famous, grisly murders never solved.

Tonight, I’ll be your guide to not only the sites of these murders but also, the historical Downtown Berk in which they occurred. I’m Hiccup Haddock, and if you’ll follow me, we’ll start right out with the site of murder number four.”

“We aren’t starting with Elizabeth Smith?” The genius with the shitty book in his pocket asks and Hiccup shakes his head.

“Nope, even though the series of Grimborn murders happened in a relatively small area, to visit the
sites in order would result in way more walking than I’m willing to do three times a night,” he gestures at the limp that no one would otherwise notice. “Plus, there another reason I like to start the tour with murder number four.” He starts walking carefully backwards, checking over his shoulder both for obstacles and to time the next phase of his introduction, “back in eighteen eighty three, the Ripped Tavern where we met today was known as the Great Dragon pub. And one night in April, eighteen eighty four, Mary Johnson was drinking at the Great Dragon pub when she approached a man sitting in the back and made an offer of her company for the night in exchange for a few pennies, just enough to afford one night’s rent of a bed at a local boarding house.”

He pauses just out of the glow of the still old-fashioned street light barely washing a six-foot-wide half circle of the alley in sickly yellow light. As uninterested as Astrid still appears to be, she’s at the front of the group, cocking her hip and crossing her arms when she stops in exactly the right spot, left foot planted three feet from the storm drain.

A lot of people drag a friend or relative along on a tour and most of the time, Hiccup gets them at least interested by the end of it, but rarely does he get such an opportunity so early in the night to do so.

“Twenty minutes after Mary Johnson led the man out of the Great Dragon pub through the side door we just left through and down the very alley that we’re standing in right now, her body was found under this street light,” he points up, “still warm to the touch, but mutilated almost beyond recognition. Cut to the point that she was identified by another prostitute she’d just been with at the pub who recognized the green bonnet bloodstained in the gutter.”

Hiccup pauses for dramatic effect, lowering his voice and looking back and forth across the small crowd. Most people are wide eyed and hanging on his every word, the armchair expert is nodding like he’s heard this all before, but luckily refraining from interrupting. Ruffnut is grinning like she’s at a circus and the lion just got loose, but Astrid is seemingly unaffected, eyebrows raised, daring him to stop wasting her time. Good thing he can definitely do that.

“We just walked the only route that can be identified without a shred of reasonable doubt as a path Viggo Grimborn himself walked over a hundred years ago and one of you completed the journey by standing exactly where Mary Johnson was killed with a slash of a sharp knife across her throat.” He points at Astrid’s feet, where her toe is impatiently tapping a quiet sneaker against the pavement. “It’s your lucky day.”

“Me?” She points at her chest, wrinkling her nose and lifting some of the shadow obscuring her still unimpressed face. The rest of the group snickers, the chill sinking in as the alley goes quiet. “I guess I’ve been having a lot of luck lately,” she huffs after a second, taking a step back and out of the light.

“That usually um…freaks people out.” He laughs, suddenly hearing his own awkward voice, like he’s giving the tour by forcing everyone to listen to a voicemail he left. “That’s fine. You’re a brave crowd, that only means I can show you more.”

Hiccup is a good tour guide, it’s one of the few things he’ll confidently claim. He knows his route, he knows the stories, he has an anecdote about every other house, every alleyway, a picture for every façade hiding a century old grisly secret. He’s funny and he’s not afraid to take it seriously. He doesn’t minimize the cost of that year in death and human suffering, but none of that has affected how fun people rate him on Trip Advisor.

But Astrid’s too fast walk between sites and cutting, unimpressed expression is throwing him off of his game.
At the churchyard where he describes the abysmal living conditions of the average poor in Berk a hundred years ago, she’s almost bored, except for raising her eyebrow every time he mentions crime. He gets a full eye roll when he laments lack of privacy in boarding houses, and treats it as a win, which is like claiming most unclear victories, a dangerous mistake.

“And before we move on to the first murder site, I need to clarify one more misconception. One that I personally blame Johnny Depp himself for and I assure you, I’m doing my best to get in touch with him about it.” Hiccup feels a little more in step when that joke hits everyone but Astrid, “for some reason, namely Hollywood, when people imagine the Grimborn victims as prostitutes, they think of beautiful blonde women in their twenties. Maybe a bit unsatisfied with life, a bit hard around the edges—”

Astrid raises her eyebrow.

Oh God, Hiccup is describing her, and she hates him inexplicably and is on his tour and her judgement feels like Grimborn’s blade choking him out.

He coughs, “they were all around forty.” What if she’s older than she looks but not forty and that makes it worse? “And like, hard life lived forty. Because life was hard. All the not eating and cheap gin and prostitution. Not modern, ‘I can’t believe she’s forty’ forty, which coincidentally is also a Hollywood invention and I don’t think I can pin that one on Mr. Depp.”

No one laughs, except Ruff, whose imaginary circus lion is apparently now eating the foot that he left in his mouth.

“I’m talking so fast because we’re behind,” he points over his shoulder, “lets cross the street and pause outside that apartment courtyard for the first murder story, then I’ll try and get us close to the site but just a warning, last night there was a bit of a complication.” He takes off across the street before anyone can say anything, jumping when someone taps on his shoulder.

“I have a question about the investigation,” the armchair expert asks in a tone which indicates he already has an answer and wants to argue about it, “do you think that the police’s reluctance to work with the press stifled witnesses from coming forward with information about the attacks?”

“I see you brought the Krogan book with you,” Hiccup gestures at the man’s pocket on the other side of the street and he nods. “It’s a decent attempt to shoehorn most of the best known advice into a convincing narrative, but it puts too much stock into people reporting crime in one of the most crime riddled areas of the metropolis. If the cops had started rewarding everyone who had information about a murder, they wouldn’t have had any time to investigate.” The crowd is regathered, but the man persists anyway.

“But if there’d been a system in place for receiving tips—”

“There was the Berk post, which people used and abused, as they do with all inadequately funded government services. Have you heard of the Grimborn letter collection?”

“Oh course.” He reaches for his book, but Hiccup holds out a hand.

“I usually do this later in the tour, but it works here, it gives me more time to umm…think about presenting the first site.” Which is another way of saying ‘keep his ears alert to any angry women brushing their teeth’, “the name Viggo Grimborn comes from a letter, written in red ink that the author claimed was blood, received by the Berk Gazette in February, eighteen-eighty-four after the third definitive murder. It was threatening, eloquent, and signed by a sadistic criminal mastermind branding himself Viggo Grimborn and asking the police to try harder.
“It marks an important point, not in the murder case, but in the history of forensic science because it was one of the first pieces of evidence to be tracked to its source and proven conclusively false, but by that point it had been printed in the Gazette and the name stuck. Which is exactly what the young journalist who fabricated the letter wanted.” He peeks through the apartment courtyard at the dark windows and fiddles with the laser pointer in his coat pocket. Another minute. “Of the hundreds of letters that helpful citizens sent to the paper and the police, approximately three were useful in the case. The rest were filled with everything from suggestions that the murders were being perpetrated by mythical creatures to blatant fetishists asking for locks of the victims’ hair and other possessions.”

Hiccup doesn’t mean to lock eyes with Astrid, so it must be her decision, because when he waits for the curiosity or the awkwardness or the laugh, he’s met with her even gaze, blue eyes unreadable and hostile and more uncomfortably familiar than they were at the bar.

“But enough about fetishes, let’s talk about Elizabeth Smith.” He talks faster than he has since he was twelve and trying to get out of kickball. “She was thirty eight years old, a widow, a prostitute, and on a cold night in November, eighteen-eighty-three, she was out trying to make back the money that she had allegedly drank away that day in order to afford a bed. That didn’t happen because someone killed her, and her body was found by a tenant in the apartment building behind us.” He digs in his bag to avoid looking up and being scrutinized more, “and it’s another notable moment in forensic history because the chief of police at the time had the idea to take Berk’s first ever crime scene photo. I have a copy of that photo, it’s extremely gruesome, so if you only like internal organs when they’re obeying their descriptor, just pass it along.”

The teenagers giggle awkwardly, their mom turns a little green. The man with the answers looks at it a little too long and Hiccup feels a pang of regret for judging him so harshly, he didn’t know what sources were shit once upon a time and he must have driven the local archivist crazy with questions. Astrid doesn’t look at it at all, passing it along upside down, eyes flicking to the apartment building behind him with a worried expression he almost places.

“It’s fine, a lot of people don’t like the gore,” he tries to joke or comfort, anything to take advantage of the momentary vulnerability in her face and wheedle his way in to her attention.

“You have any of that hair you mentioned?” She quips, her crossed arms more of a self-hug than they were, “that fetishists want?”

He…probably deserves that. Maybe not for anything he did to her, in particular, but probably for something he did to someone at some point.

“While you finish with that, before we get a little closer to the murder site, I need to point out one more thing about this wall,” he runs his hand over the sandstone brick, “the morning after the murder, written in chalk at about waist height was the message ‘All Safe’. It was thought to be written by a night watchman who had cleared the yard of homeless people taking shelter against the inside of the walls, as they didn’t have G-tech’s good old spiked benches back then,” he points at a nearby bus stop where after the buses stop running, spikes protrude from the surface to discourage the wrong kind of people sitting, “but in the morning, the block’s watchman denied it. Not only that, but he said it wasn’t on his last lap, around four o’clock in the morning, so that means that if the murderer did write it, he had to have been leaving after that time.”

When he has the picture back in his folder, he sweeps the street one last time for lurking cop lights and takes a step backwards into the courtyard.

“Alright, I’m going to do my best here to find it, but right here, above this courtyard and approximately under the light fixture in this apartment,” he turns around and aims his laser pointer
“Through the window, “is where Elizabeth Smith died.”

No one throws open the window and yells at him and he breathes a sigh of relief, turning back to the group.

“I know the landlord, and this building is mostly empty these days, but someone has moved in and last night she was not happy.” He laughs, turning off the laser pointer and taking a step towards the gate.

“She’s not happy tonight either,” Astrid announces, peeling away from the group and taking keys out of her pocket, “last night she got to learn that her apartment is a murder scene and tonight some moron shining laser pointers in her window tried to make her look at a disemboweled corpse.”

“That’s how I know you,” he groans, “you…” he touches his hat and she shakes her head.

“That was a new toothbrush, I wish I hadn’t wasted it on your dumb hat,” she waves for Ruff to follow her, even though it looked like she might have been planning to stay through the rest of the tour, “so Hiccup Haddock, is that your actual name? That could be written on a police report for harassment, for example?”

“Oh God, don’t—”

She doesn’t let him finish, instead slamming the front door of the apartment building behind her and stomping, audibly up the stairs.

“So, about the Smith murder, the police didn’t definitively record the spelling of the chalk message on the wall—”

“The Krogan book sucks, man,” Hiccup cuts his interruptor off, “it’s Berk, it rained before they interviewed the cop, Grimborn didn’t control the weather. Onto site two, do you all know where you are if I get arrested along the way?”

Everyone nods.

“Great! Let’s go.”

The blinds on Astrid’s apartment are closed during the nine thirty and eleven thirty tours and there’s a piece of paper he can’t read taped to the window in front of them. He should come back in the morning to get another look at it, but that’s arguably more masochistic than the fact that he’s intending to come back two to three times a night and shine a laser pointer at it. Maybe it’s best if he doesn’t know what it says. The message on the wall sure didn’t help Elizabeth Smith.

Neither tour goes well.

Hiccup (1:50am): when do you get off work

Snotlout (1:52am): 2 30 why

Hiccup (1:53am): why do only people who work during the day get to go to happy hour to forget how awful their job is?

Snotlout (1:55am): ill meet u at gruffs

Entering a bar to start drinking past two in the morning is something Hiccup would have thought he was done with after college. He’s the only sober person in the room, bartender included, until
Snotlout shows up, still in uniform, and sits heavily on the stool beside him.

“Do you want to know what I learned at work today?”

“Gross, no.” Snotlout scoffs, waving down the bartender and ordering a beer. The bartender eyes his uniform, suspicious, and Snotlout rolls his eyes. “I’m off duty, Gruff, is there a dress code now or something?”

“You just used to be cool,” Gruffnut grumbles as he shuffles off.

“As I was saying,” Hiccup sighs, kicking the wall under the bar, “do you want to know what I learned at work today?”

“As I said, gross, no. I don’t want to hear what supposedly interesting thing some fellow weirdo told you about creepy old murders.”

“No, no, you’ll like this one.” Hiccup clears his throat, “today at work, I learned that the only thing weirder than telling girls about mutilated corpses and having them be a little too into it, is having a girl not be into it, at all.”

“A normal human went on your creepy tour, it’s amazing that hasn’t happened yet.” Snotlout pays for his beer when the bartender sets it down, apparently not planning on staying long. “Oh wait, no it’s not.”

“I haven’t even gotten to the worst part,” he sighs, “remember how I told you last night that someone yelled at me and threw a toothbrush at the first Grimborn site?” He doesn’t wait for an answer, yanking a fistful of his hair and resting his elbow on the bar, “it was her. She somehow found me and came on my tour and I tried to show her a crime scene photo of the inside of her living room and told her about murder victim fetishists a hundred years ago.”

“So, I bust my ass racing all over town to get to every ten-fifty, ten-fifty-one, ten-sixty-six—”

“I don’t know police codes, Snotlout.”

“Person on drugs, drunk person, suspicious person—”

“Ok, I get it, people think I’m drunk and suspicious a lot, get to your point.”

“I almost got gored at a petting zoo last week because I figured the drunk guy they saw bathing in the water trough was you, on the trail of some old picture or some shit.” He shakes his head, “so can you not double harass people? I’m running out of ‘get Hiccup out of jail free’ cards.”

“I’ve never technically been picked up for anything.” Hiccup drums his fingers on the counter, “no one ever cared about Grimborn tours until that block of Condos went in by the old dock. Ever since, you can’t step off of the sidewalk without someone blowing a gasket.”

“I mean, I hate to say it but you’re right about that.” Snotlout rolls his eyes, “it’s not just the creepy tours, someone’s dog barks now and suddenly it’s my problem. But your creepy tour, in particular, doesn’t help anything. No one cares about Heather’s tours.”

“Right, she probably changed my script to say that Viggo Grimborn always observed volume restrictions at night and oh! Also, we know exactly who he was, let’s just contact next of kin of the victims and—” He cuts himself off before Snotlout loses interest, spinning his beer between his hands, “so, you’ll let me know of any harassment claims, right?”
“If I hear of them,” Snotlout shrugs. “Oh, and just by the way, was the girl you creeped out with your weird pictures hot?”

“Why does that matter?”

Snotlout shrugs, “it’s funnier if she’s hot.”

“Well, you better start laughing.”
“Astrid, come on, you know you could just come stay with me and Tuff until you figure this out,” Ruffnut perches on the arm of Astrid’s single chair, reaching out and threatening to close her laptop’s lid on the legal search that is going nowhere, “I don’t know why you’re being so stubborn about this.”

“You don’t know why I’m being so stubborn about this?” Astrid scoffs, checking her phone again to see if her disappointingly useless landlord has texted back yet. He said he’d talk to Hiccup, if that’s even his real name, but the lack of response doesn’t have her particularly hopeful. “Do you even know me?”

“Yes, I do, and I’m still offering your type-A ass my couch, think about it.”

“That’s not the point. When I signed this lease, it was a statement. I’m done with roommates, I can afford it, and I shouldn’t have to leave it just because there was some gruesome murder here and a bunch of tone deaf weirdos want to see it.” As much as she threatened it, she doesn’t really want to go to the cops. She’s not someone who lets other people handle her problems, but the more she looks at local tenant laws, the more it seems like her only option if her landlord won’t get involved.

The knock at the door doesn’t quite break her focus and she elbows Ruffnut in the leg, silently asking her to get it. If it is her landlord, he can wait a minute, he wasn’t in a hurry so she might as well finish her thought.

“So I’m just your butler now, or something, I get it.” Ruffnut sulks to the door, shaking her head.

“Thanks, you’re the best.”

The old door opens on creaky hinges that Astrid tries not to imagine it revealing a dark shadow with a sharp knife, because getting herself scared over a hundred year old murder isn’t going to help anything. Ruffnut pauses at the door for a second before looking back over her shoulder at Astrid, confused but delighted, like she couldn’t help but showing every time Hiccup stuck his foot further in his mouth on that stupid tour.

“You didn’t have to get a stripper to thank me for dealing with your weird issues.” Ruffnut laughs, “it’s like a Thursday.”

“What?” Astrid looks up, focus broken by the bizarre suggestion, and sees a fully uniformed police officer on the other side of her open front door. “Ruff, no—”

“You think I’m a stripper?” The cop smiles, surprisingly delighted by the comment, but Ruffnut hasn’t ever been one to stop while she’s ahead.

“You’re way too pretty to be an actual cop,” she reaches out and grabs the badge on his chest, “that’s obviously not real.”

It doesn’t detach. Astrid jumps to her feet, rushing to the door to grab Ruff’s arm and pull it back.

“My apologies, Sir, what can we do for you?” She puts on her most reasonable smile, hoping that if he’s here to help with her harassment issues in some way that Ruffnut didn’t just ruin it.

“It’s fine,” he winks at Ruffnut, “I’m flattered, I’ve been working out.”
“I’m assuming you didn’t come here for my friend,” Astrid turns the word into an insult as she pushes Ruffnut back a step, “to insult you. Do you need something?”

“Officer Jorgenson,” he holds his hand out and Astrid shakes it as he looks at Ruffnut, “you can call me Snotlout.”

“Astrid Hofferson,” she makes the introduction, dropping his hand and pointing at Ruffnut. “That’s Ruffnut, she doesn’t actually live here though. I just moved in this week.”

“Yes, I heard about that, can I come in?”

“Yeah, sure,” Astrid steps out of the way and shuts the door behind him. She’d offer him a place to sit, but she still only has the one chair and given Ruffnut’s behavior, she doesn’t exactly trust her friend to not make herself welcome on the officer’s lap.

Ok, that’s a slight exaggeration, but she still elbows Ruffnut to remind her to at least pretend to be respectful.

“Ok,” Officer Jorgenson deflates slightly, holding his arms out in front of himself, “so I’m not actually here on official business, so let the record show that you invited me in without actually receiving an official answer as to why—”

“Hey!” Astrid takes a step towards the door and he doesn’t block her, but something in his apologetic expression is enough to make her pause. “If it isn’t official, why the hell are you here?”

“Because Hiccup Haddock is my cousin,” he sighs, “and he told me that someone moved into the apartment that he does his creepy tours to and that he really freaked you out—”

“I am not freaked out!”

“She called me so scared her first night I thought she’d accidentally killed a guy or something,” Ruffnut snickers and Astrid smacks her on the arm.

“And I just wanted to come let you know that he’s actually a really harmless weirdo and I talked to him about being creepy and he said that you said something about filing a harassment claim—”

“What? If I did you’d throw it out for him? No wonder he goes around shining lights into people’s apartments if he has a cop covering for him—”

“Look, Miss Hofferson—”

“Since this is so unofficial, Astrid is probably more appropriate, Snotlout.” She spits his name, feeling impossibly more trapped than she did a minute ago. If going to the cops isn’t even an option and her landlord still isn’t answering, she doesn’t know what’s left.

“I’m a traffic cop, I don’t see harassment claims and if I did, I couldn’t do anything about them. And maybe I should have ditched the uniform—”

“You still could,” Ruffnut adds, taking the only chair and playing her favorite role as audience to this nonsensical drama.

Astrid is supposed to be finishing out her grad degree in peace. She has a job at Berk’s archival library for God’s sake, she made every boring decision that she possibly could have.

“Look, I get that he can be creepy, but I’m just asking you to trust me that he’s mortified. And as
his cousin, I think it’s hilarious how hot you are, because he’s awkward around hot girls when he’s not creeping them out, but I’m taking this seriously.”

“Are you hitting on me?” Astrid can’t help half raising her voice and Snotlout shakes his head.

“No, not at all, I’m just asking to give you my number—”

“Dude!” She’s not afraid of a murderer breaking in anymore, since she’s perilously close to unlocking her long sought after ability to shoot fire from her eyes.

“So that if Hiccup keeps freaking you out, you will maybe consider telling me first before reporting him. I’ll be the one to shut down his tax-evading weirdo tour, if I have to—”

“And he’s evading taxes, great, that really makes me feel like I should help him.”

“I’m just asking you to consider it,” he takes a business card out of his chest pocket and crosses out the ‘Officer’, scribbling Snotlout in its place and writing another number on the back of it. “That’s my personal cell, if he doesn’t knock this shit off, let me know.”

Astrid takes the card and stares at it silently, jaw working.

“Just theoretically, could I use that personal number for things other than your cousin being creepy?” Ruffnut asks and Astrid’s heart sinks.

She gets what it’s like to love someone who can’t be trusted to act normal without reminding and suddenly the loneliness she’s felt since moving back, surrounded by drama and files and flailing, makes her want to trust Snotlout. Or at least not add another person to the long list of people she distrusts.

“I’ll think about it,” she pockets the card and nods.

“All I’m asking.” He says goodbye then and leaves and Ruffnut pouts as Astrid gets ready to head to class.

“You know, I was asking more, you could have let him answer.”

“You’re a wreck.” Astrid doesn’t add that it’s why they’re such good friends. She hates it, but she’s feeling like a wreck too.

She goes to class and tries not to think about it. Any of it. She listens to Fishlegs wax poetic about applying the Dewey Decimal System to primary sources and she tries not to think about it. She reluctantly responds to her landlord’s shamefully late response that he’s handling it with something like ‘it’s fine’, and she tries not to dread eight o’clock.

It’s eight fifteen and her background music is loud enough that she almost doesn’t hear the knock at the door. Fearing having to deal with another less than official visit from Officer Jorgenson, she turns the music off to get the door, startled for the second time today, this time by a teenager holding a large pizza box. The smell of cheese and pepperoni reminds her that she hasn’t eaten since breakfast and it’s lucky for her own record that she’s confused enough to stutter instead of just taking it.

“I didn’t order pizza.”

“324 Harbor street, apartment 2?” The kid frowns at his receipt and then holds it out to her. “Oh, there’s a note.”
The slip of paper has a sentence along the bottom in blocky register print: From someone who is not actually a dead prostitute hair fetishist, hoping to welcome you to the neighborhood in a more normal way. No one delivers toothbrushes this last minute.

“I guess it’s for me,” she takes the box, tipping the kid for having to deal with this and being thankful that he doesn’t expect a stripper. She’s just cracking the box open when she hears a voice in the courtyard, loud and nasal enough to reverberate in the closed pane. She sneaks over, cracking it a careful inch open and bending down to listen.

“Right there, in the second floor apartment, is where Elizabeth Smith died. I used to point out the light fixture above the actual place where a fellow tenant found her body in the morning, but someone just moved in and um, they weren’t a fan of that as you can see by this lovely sign they made me.”

Astrid winces at that. It had been a momentary impulse to hang a piece of paper that says ‘Fuck Off Peeping Toms’ on the window last night, and she’d almost forgotten about it, especially with the lack of commentary in later tours. Maybe it’s only legible when the streetlights are still on, and they go out around ten here.

“But, they should be receiving an apology pizza right about now with an explanation that I am not personally a dead prostitute hair fetishist, I am only very interested in the actions of one Viggo Grimborn who might have been described with at least two of those adjectives. Now, onto site two…”

The pizza is delicious. It helps that Astrid is so hungry and so righteously victorious that she made a crazy person believe her anger was deserved, but she puts the page of coupons on her fridge with a magnet she stole from her last roommate after the whole dishes debacle. That was petty of her, wasn’t it? Petty like the sign in the window.

Then again, when she put the sign in the window, she didn’t have any reason to believe that Hiccup felt any kind of remorse, but she does now.

Getting her a pizza was a pretty decent thing to do, and Snotlout did say, repeatedly, that he’s a harmless weirdo. Maybe that’s where she’s stuck. She’s a criminology major, she knows all about harmful weirdos. She knows how malice lets people break social barriers and commit to dangerous behaviors. She understands that people go on killing sprees and mutilate their victims, but she doesn’t understand the locations where they did so becoming landmarks.

It was easy to believe Hiccup was malicious, but now that all signs are pointing to him being odd and awkward and obsessive, she can’t help the bubble of curiosity in her chest. He’s in her courtyard three times a night, always followed by a gaggle of interested people. There was that guy in the tour she ended up crashing referencing a beat up book and asking a million questions. More than that, Hiccup had strong opinions about those questions, shutting them down with markedly flat green eyes that lit up whenever he talked about walls and letters and slums.

She cracks the window leading up to the second tour. She’s not sure why, maybe it’s to see if he mentions the pizza again or the sign or if he’ll say that he thinks he got one over her. But it’s the same as the last tour, if a bit quieter, the group around him a little more involved.

“The apartment is occupied now, but it was approximately under the living room light fixture, which used to be the hallway in front of the door before a series of modernizing renovations in the nineteen eighties, that a fellow tenant found Elizabeth Smith’s body in the early hours of the morning.”
That’s a relief. No murderer came through her front door to kill anyone, apparently, and she lets out a breath she didn’t realize she was holding in, shivering at a gust of winter breeze through the blinds. The sign she made flaps and she almost reaches out to pull it down.

“Now, we’ll move to site two next, where two weeks after the discovery of Elizabeth Smith, a night guardsman found the body of Caroline Pike murdered in a similar fashion.”

Astrid peeks outside and sees a couple of girls a few years younger than herself clinging to each other like they’re watching a live action horror movie proceed and giggling, holding onto Hiccup’s every word. There’s a woman taking notes and a few dark, shivering forms made faceless by the angle of the light, leaning into the story. And Hiccup’s stupid toothpaste stained top hat bobbling slowly towards the gate as he draws them along behind him, the pied piper of murder-obsessed tourists.

She throws open the window and leans out, tossing the blinds over her head, onto her back, “hey!”

“Did you get the pizza?” He whisper-shouts back up at her and she sighs, reaching through the window to pull her sign down. He tries to catch it when she crumples it into a ball and throws it at him, but it bounces off of his chest and lands in the snow.

“Who did it?”

“I did,” he laughs, awkward, shoving his hands in his pockets, “I was the one coming out as not a prostitute hair fetishist, if that wasn’t clear.”

“No, I mean who was Viggo Grimborn? Who killed those women?” She leans her elbows on the windowsill, “I’ve heard this part of the tour about half a dozen times now, spoil the end for me. Who did it?”

“Oh, no one knows.” He shrugs.

“I get that it’s unsolved,” she shivers, rubbing her bare arms and trying not to feel the tour group’s eyes taking her in as part of the spectacle she didn’t sign up for. “But there has to be an answer.”

“There really isn’t, the crimes were committed before fingerprinting, witnesses were unreliable, police were understaffed.” He remembers to direct the last phrase at the group and he must know that his cousin came to talk to her. “Not that much has changed.”

“Yeah, nothing much has changed and we still solve things.” She doesn’t know why she’s pushing. Maybe it’s because she understands being crazy for a reason, for a conclusion, for something solid, and she has to believe that applies here. “So no one even has a theory?”

“Everyone has a theory,” he laughs, the same tired, dismissive laugh he gave the guy with the book full of wrong answers, “that doesn’t mean anyone has an answer.”

She grits her teeth. It shouldn’t be this hard to get a clear answer out of someone and when it is, she should give up, but she’s never been good at that and she keeps pushing.

“Ok, do you have a theory? You’re out here shining laser pointers into people’s apartments and droning on and on about the guy every night. You must have a theory.”

“I don’t,” he laughs, “I like the mystery.” He waves at her like that was an actual answer and she’s furious as well as cold when she shuts her window and looks around her sparse apartment.

Harmless is just a synonym for useless, apparently.
She catches herself looking up Viggo Grimborn at work three times the next day before Fishlegs is the one to notice, glancing at her screen over her shoulder and tutting. She closes the window faster than if she’d been caught ordering deviously sourced hair and spins to face him, arms crossed.

“What?”

“I thought you said you weren’t one of those…Grimborn-ologists,” he shakes his head and she sighs, teeth gritting together.

“I’m not.”

“You’re researching Viggo Grimborn at work.”

“Yes,” she swallows hard. She doesn’t like mixing work and personal drama. More than that she doesn’t like having drama, but the more she thinks about it, there’s only one way to fix this and the chances of keeping it quiet under Fishlegs’s eagle eyes are impossibly small. “Apparently my apartment was really cheap because it’s where the first Grimborn murder took place.”

“Oh,” he frowns, “how’d you learn that?”

“Well, to be honest, there’s a tour that comes by three times a night to point out my living room light fixture.” She doesn’t expect to laugh, and more than that she doesn’t expect Fishlegs to follow, a wheezy little chuckle falling out of his mouth. He’s out of practice and it makes her a little more comfortable being so righteously irritated about the entire situation.

“I can see how that might spark your curiosity.”

She bites her lip, thinking for a second before speaking, “so, you get a lot of people coming in here about it, don’t you?”

“Every other person, at a minimum,” he sits down at his desk across from hers and starts sorting through the box of papers he’d been carrying, “it doesn’t matter that we have the most Civil War maritime shipping manifestos of any library in the world. All anyone cares about is Viggo Grimborn.”

“I didn’t know the case wasn’t solved,” she adds carefully, reopening her search and skimming through names that are starting to sound familiar. Experts and suspects and victims, all carrying equal heft in a conversation that should be about one more than others. “Is that why it’s such a thing?”

“While I won’t claim to be a Grimborn expert,” he looks up, a bit sheepish, confident in a way that’s been called arrogant so many times he tried and failed to dial it back in the shy direction, “I’ve spent long enough trying to figure out why it’s so captivating that if there was an answer, I would have found it by now.”

“I’ve been thinking,” she looks around at the stacks of dense, shapeless information around them. Newspapers and journals and notebooks. Files and files of receipts and notes and pieces of paper that people stored away in awkward places or forgot about entirely. “Maybe it’s the mystery. Maybe that’s why some guy is leading tours to my apartment complex courtyard every night, and if it wasn’t a mystery anymore…”

“Astrid,” Fishlegs laughs, comfortable with her name when he’s telling her what he feels is an indisputable truth instead of telling her what to do, “hundreds, if not thousands of people have tried to solve the Grimborn murders. There are dozens of books published, forcing the facts in order—”
“Hear me out,” she feels like Snotlout must have, asking her not to call the cops, “all of those people have wanted to be right more than they’ve wanted this ridiculous thing to end. You want people to appreciate this collection and I want my apartment to be off of the must-see locations list at the Berk tourism center.”

“Again, if detectives within hours of the crime couldn’t solve the case, what makes you think you can?”

She smiles, looking admiringly at the collection, “you know, none of those detectives had your help. There’s a reason I chose the records collection as my work-study. I knew there was a lot I could learn here.”

“Are you appealing to my vanity?” Fishlegs asks like someone who denies having any vanity at all. Astrid forces her smile brighter. “We’ll have to be systematic about this, and quiet, I’ve been fending off requests for years to start a Grimborn-ology research group here. I’ll start with the Gazette, you can take the Berk Enquirer, it’s notable for being on the forefront of alien conspiracy theories, but I can’t deal with those again.”

The Berk Enquirer is a trove of theories, but Fishlegs finds a conclusive narrative in the Gazette. The order of murders, the detectives researching them, and the letters sent to the press are all soon settled into a rough narrative that they stick to, testing out suspects and looking for more. Astrid largely ignores the tours outside her apartment at night, hearing the same few snippets on rotation until it becomes like an alarm, the third tour serving as her reminder to go to bed before the next day.

After about a week of research, Fishlegs finds a journal written by a prominent free mason at the time of the murders, questioning someone who recently failed to ascend into the order. She means to keep it a secret, but Hiccup is outside, talking about mystery and she opens her bedroom window this time, leaning out to interrupt him.

“What about the masonic connection?” She shouts down and he does a double take before signaling that the group pause.

“Referring to the mutilation of the second and fourth victims?” He takes his hat off and scratches his head before putting it back on, slightly crooked.

“Yeah.”

“Doesn’t explain how Richard Miller could have committed the third murder in March eighteen eighty four, since he was in Paris and all.”

“How’d you know I was talking about Richard Miller?” She never expected him to know the name and can’t help but feel halfway dismissed.

“Who else had openly decried the masons?” He smiles and points towards the gate, “now, onto site two.”

“Hold on, how do you know he was in Paris?”

“Records from the cargo ship Thebes that frequently made the Berk to Normandy route in the eighteen eighties, he travelled with a family load of wool cargo.” He leaves before she can ask more about it and she spends the next day grumbling under her breath while asking Fishlegs for every eighteen-eighty dated cargo record out of Berk.

“You’re getting too hung up on what one of these crazies said,” Fishlegs cautions her around five,
“that’s the point, their facts don’t line up and they use it to frustrate you.”

“Maybe you’re right,” she sighs, deciding to put the shipping manifests away, “he just wants me to be wrong though, anything for the mystery.”

“Then we find something conclusive.” Fishlegs doesn’t dismiss the comment and she resolves to find the right window to thank him.

The next week, Hiccup shuts down three full days of Drago Bludvist research with the fact that Drago couldn’t have committed the murders because his single arm would have forced him to find a surface to brace against, and the fourth murder was functionally in the middle of an alley. Hiccup deftly cuts across what Astrid thought was a decent supposition that the deputy detective Ryker had something to do with it, because Ryker was filling out an arrest report in the adjoining city of Freezing to Death at the time of the third murder.

Worst of all, Astrid gets the feeling that he’s enjoying this. He pauses his tour a moment too long, waiting for her to retort one night when he dismisses the Bludvist theory in the courtyard, even though it doesn’t make sense to bring up around the site of the first event. She disproved it on her own after mentioning it to him, finding a manifesto stating he was on his way to Bucharest from Berlin on the date of the fourth murder, but Hiccup probably already knows that.

Three weeks in, she asks him about the plausible connection between Grimborn and the travelling bible salesman Johann, who was selling in Berk at the time of all known Grimborn murders, and he shrugs, citing the same lack of evidence that frustrated her at work.

“Is it still three times a night?” Fishlegs asks at work, handing Astrid an aptly dated newspaper.

“As far as I know,” she shrugs, “I’ve been here late enough to miss the first tour a few times a week. He’s respecting the blinds though.”

“You could drop it, then.” He suggests and she can tell he hopes she’ll do it only so he can have an excuse to do the same.

Astrid is a lot of things. Stubborn, hard-headed, and independent, sure, but a reason to quit just doesn’t fit.

“So could you,” she challenges, pulling out a new box of Berk Enquirers. Between theories about dragons disemboweling people on the streets of downtown Berk, there are actually some decently reported witness accounts. Even if the witnesses aren’t necessarily sober, they’re earnest. Lights in the sky could mean someone running across the rooftops. They could mean…something.

A fact she’s trying to pull from thin air to keep Hiccup from showing up under her windowsill every night.

It’s early when she finds it, early because she couldn’t take multiple tours to her apartment on a Friday night. A note scribbled in pencil on the back of a Berk Enquirer dated eleventh of November eighteen eighty four. She shows it to Fishlegs, who has an analogous report from the Gazette, and it’s not an answer, but maybe it’s enough.

Enough to confront Hiccup in person, instead of sitting in her apartment, thinking about fixing this or ending it or she doesn’t even know. She assembles her sources, the pictures of the notes she found and the dates of the papers on which they were written and then she waits.
Chapter 4

Hiccup and Heather found the Johann connection while she was helping him research his book. It started, like most of his best ideas, as a joke while he was sifting through Sergeant Johanssen’s notes on the Grimborn case. Johann was by all metrics, insufferable and attention-seeking, and as hard as it is to define the character of people who’ve been dead over a hundred years, the sheer number of mostly useless anecdotes he made officers sit through speaks for itself. It was late in his Dad’s office when Hiccup flopped back and griped that if Johann was sadistic enough to make the Sergeant sit through one more tale about morality and cattle, maybe he was sadistic enough to murder and mutilate a series of prostitutes.

Heather laughed, but something about it stuck with both of them because they kept looking into it anyway, as silly as it was, pulling the string to see what was there. There are no shortage of primary sources citing Johann using the murders to sell more bibles, aiming to cleanse the streets of moral filth by educating them about the might of the lord.

As a theory, it holds out further than most. In fact, there’s nothing to disprove it. Johann was in Berk during all of the Grimborn murders. A couple of the Grimborn letters even have phrases in common with notes taken on Johann’s witness accounts. It’s entirely plausible that a bible salesman in the late eighteen eighties killed a string of loose women in a violent campaign to impose morality on Downtown Berk, but there’s absolutely no way to prove it.

That’s where Hiccup and Heather started fighting about it, she couldn’t take the open end. She found random slayings in downtown Outcast Island, no mutilation, not even all prostitutes or obviously morally destitute people, and tried to start pinning them on Johann based on the fact he wasn’t noted to be in Berk that month. She was ready to pull the trigger on something definitive and she started pushing it in tours, adding in leading pauses in front of the church, where Reverend Svenson encouraged Johann to lower prices as a form of aid, rather than expanding efforts to feed the poor.

Just because there’s nothing wrong with the Johann theory doesn’t mean there’s anything right. Knowing things too well gets in the way of learning more about them, and Hiccup is in this to learn, not know.

At least, that’s a very polite and summarized version of what he yelled at Heather and quit, calling her tour a stolen heap of sensationalist garbage that warps the facts for her own vanity.

It’s ironic now that he’s approaching her out of his own vanity. After a night of bugging Snotlout about how Astrid possibly could have known about Johann and getting nothing more than grumbling, it occurred to him that maybe she took Heather’s tour to have something new to shout down at him. And well, since she already made it clear how she feels about him looking in her apartment, asking about her whereabouts in reference to Heather’s tour seems like a good way to press that harassment charge.

He gets to the Ripped Tavern a bit early a couple days after Astrid’s Johann revelation and looks for Heather. She’s at the bar, talking to her brother, and Dagur steps away when he sees Hiccup approaching, presumably warning Heather, because she turns and raises an eyebrow.

“Can I do something for you, Hiccup?” She cocks her head, “I thought I was too sensationalized for a rational person like you to need anything from me.”

“I just wanted to ask if you’re still talking about Johann.” He adjusts his bag on his shoulder,
fidgeting with his laser pointer in his pocket.

“Why wouldn’t I?” She sets her jaw, “since we discovered the idea together—”

“Has anyone been particularly curious about it lately?” He cuts her off, uninterested in rehearsing the fight. As long as she doesn’t publish anything without his notes, he’s content to trim the sides of Berserker tours’ profits as long as she holds out.

“Why? Did you tell someone who wanted to finish figuring it out?” She rolls her eyes and Hiccup sighs.

“She’d be about our age, blonde, moved into Elizabeth Smith’s apartment and umm, well, she’s not a fan of my tour route—”

“No blonde women have asked me about Johann while complaining about your trespassing habits,” Heather shakes her head, “I swear, if Snotlout wasn’t looking out for you—”

“Well, he is.” He doesn’t need this lecture from Heather, of all people. Back before she took herself so seriously, she’s the one who dropped through the boarded-up window at Number 31, Harbor Road to examine the third site before it got torn down to make room for condos. “And I was just wondering if anyone asked, but it sounds like no, so…thanks, have a sensational tour.” His fake bitterness doesn’t do much to her and he wishes he hadn’t said anything at all when she frowns, concerned. “Don’t even—”

“What if someone else figured it out? I’m not the one being too petty to publish anything, I still have all my notes.”

“Yeah and mine, how do they fit into the version of reality you tour?” He doesn’t expect an answer to that and he doesn’t get one. Letting Heather keep the notes is letting her have the last word without having a verbal WWE match in Victorian Garb, and his hat has been through enough lately already.

Heather’s tour leaves on time and Hiccup’s slips out the side door fifteen minutes after. It’s a foggy night and the girl on the spot where Mary Johnson was found squeaks and jumps into her boyfriend’s arms when she realizes.

He’s a little ahead of schedule when he approaches the first site, talking a little too fast and trying not to hope that Astrid will have something to say today. Maybe something that reveals her methods or reasons. Maybe she’ll lean out the window again and argue with him, shivering in her pajamas. He shouldn’t have noticed, and he definitely shouldn’t have remembered, especially given he had to spend the rest of that tour fending off someone asking after her theories. That should have been annoying enough for him to wish she’d stayed inside, but well, he didn’t.

It’s worse that she’s pretty in a way that makes looking directly at her difficult. Funnier for Snotlout, but worse for him.

The lights are out in her apartment though, like she’d rather find somewhere else to be than argue with him, and he steps to the side of the sandstone wall, rubbing his hand over it and remembering the first time he came here. It was the first place he stood that he knew that at some point, Viggo Grimborn stood in the exact same spot.

“Before we get a little closer to the site of the first Grimborn murder,” he pauses when he looks at the group and sees Astrid at the back of it, arms crossed and keys dangling from her hand, like she caught him on her way home. “Where we won’t enter or peek in at all, because that would be
“You’re talking about the ‘All Safe’ message, right?”

“Well, I was going to,” he pats the wall, focusing back on the group and remembering where he was, “right, this wall, on the morning that Elizabeth Smith’s body was found, there was a message on it, presumably left by the murderer. The officer on his morning patrol assumed it was meant for him from the officer on watch the night before, but when questioned, the night officer didn’t know anything about it.”

“And because there were no pictures taken of it, because of a rainstorm later that afternoon, the main source for the message has always been the notes from the officer who was called by a witness to discover Elizabeth Smith’s body.” Astrid excuses herself unnecessarily because the group is already splitting to look back at her, confused but used to being talked at by this point in the tour. She could thank him for the warm up, maybe, but he doesn’t think he’ll be that lucky.

“So, the message, ‘All Safe’ has always been understood to be a statement, as in, behind this wall, everything is safe.” She steps up next to Hiccup, in front of the wall, fiddling with her keys like she’s nervous even as she gestures at the bricks.

“Oh, are you going to give my tour?” He doesn’t mean for the sarcasm to shut her down, necessarily, but he doesn’t expect her to shove it off, standing up straighter and looking between him and the tour group.

“I was going to fix it, if that’s ok with you.”

“Fix it?”

“The ‘All Safe’ message was not officially photographed as part of the crime scene on the morning that Elizabeth Smith was discovered murdered,” she reaches into her jacket pocket and pulls out a piece of paper that unfolds to an eight and a half by eleven, slightly smeared, freshly printed scan of the Berk Enquirer. Judging by the font, it’s copied from a paper issued in the late eighteen hundreds, but Hiccup doesn’t recognize it. He tends to stay away from the Enquirer, because he got done with stories about Viggo Grimborn running away with the Loch Ness monster.

“But, a back-page story broke in the Enquirer on the same day as the investigation began, and the ‘All Safe’ message is clear in the background.”

“What?” Hiccup stops short, reaching reflexively for the paper, but she holds it over her head away from him, eyes flicking between his and his hat.

“Well, if you didn’t know about this, I guess I am going to have to give the tour.” She offers him the picture and when he takes it, snatches his hat off of his head and puts it on herself. “Which means I need the stupid tour outfit.”

“Hey!” Hiccup reaches for his hat back but looks at the picture at the same time, his indignance and his hand pausing in unison when he angles the grainy image under the street lamp and clearly sees the chalk text of ‘All Safe’ written on the wall where they’re standing. “Oh my God.”

“As I was saying, when you actually see the famous ‘All Safe’ message, it’s obvious that it’s something else entirely.” She nods decisively, the too big top hat tilting forward over her forehead, “it doesn’t say ‘All’, it says Al, I. It’s a signature.”

“How did you find this?” He traces it with a fingertip.

“Aren’t you going to pass it around to the group?” She adjusts his hat, and he swallows hard,
nodding a little too quickly and exhaling a suddenly obvious puff of steam into the cold air.

“Sure, yeah.”

“Anyway, as I was saying, presumably it’s a signature apparently announcing that one Al, last name starting with I, was safe at the wall the morning of November eleventh, eighteen eighty-three. And the assumption has always been that it was connected with the Grimborn murders, because Elizabeth Smith was automatically considered the first Grimborn victim.” She starts pacing a couple of steps back and forth, hands clasped behind her back, and she’s mocking him, sure, but she’s teasing him too.

And she brought him new Grimborn evidence and it makes him wonder if she figured out about Johann herself, and that thought makes it kind of hard to breathe.

“But, I’d like to present an alternate hypothesis,” she turns to Hiccup, in particular, blue eyes on fire and he feels like he can’t move. Not his foot, not his expression, which is somewhere between rejected, stunned, and thrilled. “The same night that Elizabeth Smith was killed, there was a robbery in the downstairs of 324 Harbor Road. It’s glossed over, because of the murder, but all signs point to it being a two-man job. One lookout, one person casing the basement apartment belonging to Elizabeth Smith’s brother-in-law, who she could have easily been visiting. A week later, one Alfred Ireland was caught with that brother-in-law’s monogrammed knife and arrested for breaking and entering.”

“What are you saying?” Hiccup passes the picture to the nearly forgotten tour group and the first girl looks at it with only casual interest.

“I’m saying that a man, whose name could easily be abbreviated to ‘All’ was caught after stealing a knife the very night that Elizabeth Smith was stabbed, in the upstairs of the house where her brother-in-law lived. I’m proposing that she’s not a Grimborn victim at all, but a casualty of a robbery that wasn’t meant to be anything more.” Astrid reaches up for his hat, taking it deftly off of her head and setting it back on his. Her thumb grazes his ear and he swallows hard.

“So, my apartment was just unfortunate enough to be the location of some casual, run of the mill violence, and does not belong on a Grimborn tour.” She exhales and nods, obviously pleased with herself as she points at the circulating picture. “You can keep that.”

“Thanks,” Hiccup’s voice cracks and he clears his throat, “thank you, umm, but—”

“Don’t you have an actual tour to start?” She waves him off as she walks to the front door of the building and lets herself in, “since this isn’t a location on it, I mean.”

“I’m confused,” a guy in the tour group cuts across Hiccup’s thoughts, “is this a location of a Grimborn murder or not.”

“I don’t—Ok, I don’t know why you guys chose my tour.” Hiccup scratches his face, feeling flushed and off kilter again, brain flitting between Astrid and Johann and evidence he’s never imagined actually seeing. “Or I do, it’s because it’s cheaper, but I like to pretend it’s because it’s less sensationalized and less…like I’m trying to spoon-feed you my own opinion of who Viggo Grimborn was or might have been.”

“It’s also longer,” a woman offers helpfully, “longer and cheaper.”

“Great. Thanks,” he laughs, “longer and cheaper, I’ll add that to the website.” He looks up at Astrid’s apartment, the light turning on behind closed blinds, her shadow moving in front of it like she’s pacing. “I’ve been studying Viggo Grimborn for about five years, I’ve read police notes and
fictionalized accounts and theories that the murder was committed by anyone from the crown prince of a now defunct Scandanavian monarchy to a gang of rogue Free Masons. Most sources point to one person, most likely a man, committing at least four murders, starting in that apartment with Elizabeth Smith in November eighteen eighty-three.” He resists the urge to snatch the picture back and stare at it, to run home and compare it to his scans of letters and detectives’ writing.

“But you don’t know?” Someone else asks and Hiccup shrugs.

“I don’t, and no one ever will. There’s nothing in my knowledge saying what she just said isn’t correct, but there’s no DNA, there’s very little evidence left. Sure, the case was foundational to modern forensics, but like all foundational things, the police work was flawed and riddled with mistakes.” He gestures down the road, “let’s go to the second site, maybe the Grimborn fairy will come inform me that it was actually committed by…I don’t know, an escaped circus dragon.”

Hiccup is a little surprised that anyone follows him, but then again, he is giving them a real bang for their ten bucks. He manages to find his rhythm again at the second site, showing the gruesome pictures people love to cringe at, and walking too fast to illustrate the complicated timeline of the proposed double event. But he’s glad when it starts raining, a veritable deluge cutting off the last ten minutes of the tour and sogging the brim of his hat by the time he gets home. Usually, he hates cancelling, but tonight he’s fumbling his phone out of his pocket to update weather concerns on his site before he’s even up the stairs to his apartment.

“I thought I smelled wet goat,” Snotlout catches him in the entry way, shrugging into his uniform jacket and zipping it up.

“Good to see you too.”

“You know, because your coat is made of old goat fur or whatever.”

“Wool,” Hiccup takes off the offending coat, hoping that Snotlout doesn’t notice him sniffing it. It doesn’t smell great, he could dry clean more often, but Astrid would have assumed that’s just the smell of murder sites, right? “You’re looking for wool.”

“Whatever,” Snotlout pats his holster and checks how secure his badge is, “are you in for the night?”

“Probably,” Hiccup shrugs, “Astrid actually umm…delivered some new evidence to me, I’ve got a lot to dig into.”

“She seemed so normal, I can’t believe she’s shouting weird shit out the window at you.”

“Grimborn-ology is cool,” Hiccup dodges when Snotlout tries to put him into a headlock, laughing and shuffling backwards towards his dad’s old office, “I always told you.”

“Yeah, but I never thought it would start attracting hot girls,” he says goodnight and leaves and Hiccup lays the photo Astrid gave him out on his desk, next to his most recent, half full notebook.

The fact is he’s not good with data he didn’t find himself, he always wants to see the paper it came from or the notes themselves. The obsessive double checking of everything Heather found drove her crazy, but when he was having to back track from theories to the facts themselves, it was even more necessary. He drums his fingers on the desk for a minute and his eyes dart to an old book on the shelf, the only one he has duplicates of.

He still doesn’t know how Astrid found out about Johann. Or the chalk message.
She hasn’t come through on the harassment threat yet, and now she’s researching. And Snotlout isn’t here to tell him that going to see her is a horrible idea, and maybe it’s not, they have a shared interest.

He grabs a copy of the book, second edition, the one he found first, on the way out of the office and changes into an actual raincoat before heading out, hood pulled low over his forehead against the rain. It’s a Saturday night, chances are she won’t even be home. Maybe he could leave the book with a note in it. His number maybe, that would be a better way of communicating than her occasionally taking over his tour or shouting out windows. That’s a good way to phrase it, not too presumptive, just as a way of sharing evidence.

He’s so busy thinking through what he’s going to say and the rain is loud enough on his hood that he almost runs into two people on the sidewalk, one in an official looking black uniform that he’s really learning to hate and the other huddled under an umbrella with a heavy looking backpack.

“It’s past curfew,” the man in the uniform says, blocking an alley that the woman with the umbrella is apparently trying to walk through, “the courtyard is closed to everyone but residents.”

“I’m not trying to go through the courtyard, I’m just cutting through to the shelter.” The woman shivers, “please, it closes in ten minutes.”

“The courtyard—”

“Hi, what seems to be the problem here?” Hiccup cuts in, doing his best Snotlout’s-cop-voice impression and standing up straight.

“Neighborhood Watch Force concern,” the man in the uniform tries to brush him off, showing a pseudo-official badge that Hiccup knows to mean nothing. Snotlout complains about these guys enough, the private security employed by the condo developers to keep the streets a certain brand of clean are really starting to think they’re cops.

“I live in the neighborhood.” Hiccup points over his shoulder, “one of the brownstones back there, what’s the neighborhood concern?”

“The other side of this building is visible from The Docks,” he uses the pretentious name of the ugly condos he apparently works for, “I’ve been instructed to keep the streets empty past curfew for the safety of the neighborhood.”

“Well, I feel safe,” Hiccup turns to the woman, who’s scared and probably homeless, “I’ll walk her to the shelter, I know the guy who runs it, I can get him to open the door even if we go the long way.”

“Good, you’ll have to,” the uniform brings gravitas that doesn’t hold water and if Hiccup weren’t worried about scaring the woman further, he’d point it out.

The woman’s name is Jennifer and it sounds like she’s trying to navigate a difficult divorce, but Hiccup doesn’t pry. He delivers her to the back door of the shelter, texting Gobber to open up. His usual lecture about being late ends abruptly when Hiccup mentions his conversation with the NWF.

“No one will tell me what those pushy bastards are supposed to be allowed to do,” he shakes his head.

“They’ve been driving Snotlout crazy too,” Hiccup shrugs, “I just thought you’d want to know they’re blocking people crossing town, you might want to loosen up when you close the doors.”
“Right, like I’m not already up against their curfew laws,” Gobber rolls his eyes, “thanks lad, great advice. Oh, and by the way, speaking of driving people crazy, are you still harassing my tenants?”

“You say harassing, I say stimulating their curiosity,” Hiccup grins, “it seems I have a new source of Grimborn info. I’m heading over to talk to Astrid now.”

“She invited you?”

“She stimulated my curiosity,” he winces, stepping backwards out of the range where Gobber could cuff his ear with a cold, metal hook.

“I’m sure she did,” Gobber shakes his head, “you know, maybe I could get that NWF to keep my tenants safe too. Keep the riff-raff out of my courtyard.”

“Hey, that’s what I’m for, you want me out of a job?”

“Maybe then you’d be into a real one,” Gobber grumbles as he goes back inside and Hiccup yanks his hood back up, heading towards Astrid’s apartment the back way to avoid any more run ins. He cuts across the street at the second murder site, patting the book in his inner pocket to make sure it’s still dry and ringing the visitor bell on the front door of Astrid’s building to get temporary access.

It gives five minutes for an interior door to open, and if none do, Gobber is alerted and tonight, would know to call Snotlout, so keeping this under five minutes if necessary is probably for the best. He really just wants to drop off the book and ask Astrid a few questions, if she seems receptive. If not, there has to be another way to track down her sources, there are only so many collections with hundred year plus old Berk Enquirers.

He knocks on the door and takes a step back so that she can see him clearly through the peephole, checking his watch and vowing to leave in three minutes, no matter what. She opens the door almost immediately, wearing sweatpants with her hair braided over her shoulder and the suspicious glare he’s starting to think of as typical on her face.

“What do you want?”

“Hi,” he brushes beaded up water off of the front of his coat before unzipping it to get out the book.

“Hi, what are you doing here?” She blocks the doorway with a confidence that shows she’s not really worried about him fighting his way through, and looking at her, that’s probably fair. “You don’t have a troupe of people who want to see my living room with you, right?”

“No, I cancelled my last two tours,” he shakes his head, wet hair dripping onto the floor, “weather.”

“But you couldn’t skip your pilgrimage?” She steps back, gesturing at her mostly empty living room.

Hiccup can’t help but impose the tenant house walls over it, the pre-remodel door about six feet behind her, eternally immortalized in those first crime scene photos. There were three apartments on this floor then instead of two, and the kitchen plumbing had to go through an external add on that made the window on the far wall wider.

“I brought you a book,” he holds it out to her and she stares at it, suspect.
“Viggo Grimborn Solved: The Admiral Haddock Connection.” She reads the title and her hand twitches towards it, curious even as her face betrays nothing.

“You asked a couple weeks ago what my theory was. I told you I liked the mystery, and that’s true, but this is my favorite theory.” He waits a beat and almost pulls his hand back, but she takes the book and starts flipping through it, leaning her shoulder on the door frame.

“Admiral Hiccup Haddock?” She raises an eyebrow, “so that’s not your real name? It’s an alias or something?”

“No, it’s my real name, I’m named after him. He’s my great-great-great-great-grand uncle or something, I’m not exactly sure what you call your great-great-great-grandfather’s brother, I probably miscounted greats—”

“Did he do it?” She frowns, looking at the publishing information. Second edition, nineteen forty-five underlined.

“Oh God no,” he laughs, “his dad had been the crown prince before the republic and then raised a son who had an esteemed navy career and retired to police work, but this guy, A. M. Mildew was absolutely sure that he spent the summer he was twenty-four murdering prostitutes in Downtown Berk. Absolutely none of it makes sense, there’s a whole passage hinting at a victory song at The Academy actually referring to this complicated web of forbidden, gay, masonic relationships.”

She raises an eyebrow and flips through, skimming his notes in the margins, “so it’s bullshit.”

“An utter, steaming pile of it.” He nods, “my favorite theory, it has my name all over it.”

“Funny,” she snorts, a dry little laugh that reaches her eyes more than the rest of her expression. “Why are you telling me this?”

“You showed me a picture I’ve been wanting to see for about five years, a picture I didn’t think existed.” He tucks his hands in his pockets, his jeans damp almost through from the rainy walk over. “And Johann was kind of my pet theory, for a while, I didn’t tell anyone but my old partner. At first, I thought you must have talked to her, but she said no. And well, it seems like you’ve been doing your own research, I was guessing—hoping, maybe—that you were curious.”

“I work part time at the archives at the university,” she sets the book inside on a shelf or table he can’t see, and it feels like a win, if not a definitive victory. “If it was all about the mystery, I thought maybe if I solved it, I could diminish some of the allure.”

“But then I come here and tell you that my favorite theory is the absolute nonsense one that I happen to be named after…”

“Any chance we could compromise on you buying me soundproof curtains?” She smiles then, not quite friendly, a mischievous glint in her blue eyes as she takes half a step forward, almost into the hallway.

“Let me give you a private tour,” he blurts, gesturing at her living room and down the stairs beside him in a combination that’s probably more jazz hands than anything else. “The real tour, the three in the morning tour, with the good stuff I leave out most of the time.”

Her brows knit together as she stands up straight, arms crossed and instantly closed off again, “no, I don’t think so.”

“Oh,” he flushes, “I thought you were maybe umm, warming up to me a little there, guess I
misread that. I’ll go—"

“No, as in ‘no, I’m not going on a serial killer memorabilia tour at three in the morning with a guy I don’t know’. That sounds like a really good way to get murdered.”

“When you put it that way, that makes sense,” he looks at his shoes for a second, “you have a gift for framing things.” Which is the lamest compliment that anyone has ever given anyone and he winces.

“You keep needing me to remind you of really obvious things.” She looks like she might be about to smile again, and Hiccup can’t help but push his luck, tapping at his watch.

“Let me try, you know how time is circular?”

She frowns, “I’d say time is linear, last time I checked.”

“Ok, sure, but our understanding of a repeating twenty-four-hour day is circular.” He waits for her to nod, one shoulder shrugging slightly, “so if we follow that theory, at some point, really late becomes early. So, while staying up to meet someone to go on a Grimborn tour with some guy you barely know at three in the morning might be creepy, starting your day outlandishly early by meeting a guy who gave you a book on his family’s fake sordid history for a Grimborn tour might be totally fine.”

“Oh, so mornings I have to be at work at four-thirty, you’re saying it’s normal to add a Grimborn murder tour detour to my morning commute?”

“Four-thirty? The private tour is at least two hours.” He assures her, “and by that point it’s getting light out, which makes it even harder for it to be creepy.” He can see her thinking about it, biting her lip and looking over her shoulder at the book. “And if worse comes to worst and I default to my obviously genetic tendencies towards murder, I bet you can totally take me.” He flexes, “noodle arms.”

“I’ll…” she sighs, “I’ll let you know if I ever have a morning that early. Give me your number?”

“Yeah, sure, that’s—here,” he hands her his phone, “put yours in, I’ll text you.”

“One condition,” she passes the phone back and forth between her hands, “you aren’t going to start a daily Grimborn facts text service, are you?”

“Not until you ask me to,” he nods, “which you will, after my private tour.”

“Sure.” She hands his phone back and stares at him another second, taking a slow step backwards into her apartment. “So, I’ll let you know.”

“Right.” He nods, rezipping his jacket and steeling himself to go back into the rain, even though he doesn’t think keeping warm will be a problem this time. “Looking forward to it.”
“How’s the book?”

“Aawful,” Astrid answers Fishlegs’s question without looking up, crossing her ankle over her knee, “it doesn’t make any sense.”

“Oh,” he starts typing something but she can still feel his eyes on the top of her head, “since you skipped lunch to read it, I figured it must be good.”

“It’s idiotic,” she finds the end of a sentence and sets it down, almost vindictively splitting the binding by pressing its open pages into her desk, “and I skipped lunch because I’m meeting a friend after work and was going to slip out early.”

“Not because of the book?” He raises an eyebrow, “because I thought you were in this to avoid Grimborn-ology.”

Astrid laughs, “Fish, you of all people know what I think of Grimborn-ology, but this isn’t even scientific enough to earn that bogus title.” She clears her throat and flips a couple of pages back, “and I quote ‘the most damning connection between the young Hiccup Haddock and the murders happens to be an old academy racing song with the lyric: ‘I’ve got my sword and I’ve got my mace and I’ve got my wife with the ugly face’. At first pass, this seems like standard Viking brashness, but looking at the year the song was first played by the academy band, eighteen-eighty-two, the same year the proposed connection between Hiccup Haddock and Mary Johnson occurred, the connection becomes clear’.”

“What connection?” Fishlegs frowns.

“There is none, it’s idiotic.”

“You’re more than two-thirds of the way through it,” he points out and Astrid shuts the book, nostrils flaring as she shoves it in her bag. It’s not any of his business. “Where did you get that anyway? It looks old.”

“Hiccup gave it to me,” she sighs, squinting at her computer screen and trying to remember what she was doing. Right, she was helping find some file for her advisor’s research, but she kept drifting across Grimborn articles and distracting herself.

“Admiral Hiccup Haddock?” There’s something about Fishlegs’s always teasing snort that makes her answer even when she wants to ignore him and while it’s led to some great discoveries these last few weeks, right now it’s beyond obnoxious.

“No, the one who gives Grimborn tours outside of my apartment. Apparently, they’re related.” Astrid thought he was lying about that at first, but from the official portrait of Admiral Haddock in the book, it’s maybe the only part that’s true. They have the same long nose and straight eyebrows, although Admiral Haddock’s eyes match his face’s naturally stern expression while Hiccup’s have always been a bit more hectically excited. A younger photo of the man shows his straight, angled jaw without the graying beard, very similar to Hiccup’s jaw, which was unfortunately accentuated without the stupid hat.

Fishlegs must notice her blushing, feeling stupid about noticing once again how decently cute Hiccup is without the period garb, and he raises a judgemental eyebrow.
“He brought me the book after I explained what we found about the first victim to him,” she sighs, “and he invited me on a private tour, at three in the morning, like that’s not a really good way to get murdered.”

“He asked you out?” Fishlegs is surprisingly excited by the information, leaning forward over his desk.

“No, he asked me on a creepy private murder tour.” She rubs her forehead, attempting to get rid of her blush with the power of wishful thinking. Maybe he was kind of cute when he muddled through some absolute bullshit explanation of the difference between late and early, but that doesn’t make it a date and it doesn’t make it any less weird.

“What did you say?”

“I said…I’d let him know.”

“Right,” Fishlegs rolls his eyes goes back to work, “I’m sure you will.”

Astrid tells Ruffnut about the conversation the second she plops into the booth across from her and Tuffnut, pausing briefly to order a drink and finishing with, “what do you think he meant by that?”

“I don’t know, maybe he picked up on how weird you’re being about this tour,” Ruffnut shrugs, “which is still going on, by the way, despite all your research to stop it.”

“I’m not being weird,” Astrid scoffs.

“You’re being a little weird for not handing forward my dossier,” Tuffnut points at a thick binder on the table between them, scooting it an inch closer to her with one finger, “I think you’re both just scared of the truth.”

“Theodore Roosevelt was not the Grimborn Killer, Tuff,” Astrid takes a sip of her drink when it arrives.

“Right, and his wife wasn’t the secret fourth victim of a total of eight,” Tuffnut rolls his eyes, “and hunting wasn’t an alibi. The national parks weren’t a hopeful precursor of the future where he could set up human game preserves—”

Ruffnut cuts him off by shoving a jalapeno popper in his mouth, “has he texted you?”

“Hiccup?”

“No, the ghost of Theodore Roosevelt after being discovered for his crimes.” She shakes her head, “of course I mean Hiccup, who else are we always talking about these days?”

“How are things at work?” Astrid tries to change the subject but when it doesn’t work, she distracts herself with Tuffnut’s binder, opening it to the middle. “No, he hasn’t texted, not since the one message to get me his number.”

“Here, let me show you this one thing,” Tuffnut flips to a purple tab in the back of the binder and grins excited.

“This is a crossword puzzle that you filled out entirely wrong,” Astrid blinks at him, “or are you saying you actually think ‘bull moose party’ is another word for ‘unsolved murder’? It was supposed to be cold case, you crammed multiple letters into every square.”
“Or did I?”

“Yes, you clearly did.” She laughs, “you know, Tuff, I didn’t think it was possible, but this might be a bigger load of crap than the Admiral Haddock book that Hiccup gave me.”

“Which you read,” Ruffnut adds with a shrug and a knowing look.

“Ok, what do you think I should do? Since you seem to have so many opinions about this.”

“I think you should go on the private murder tour with the cute weirdo who you’ve been flirting with for weeks,” she says it like it’s the most obvious thing in the world and Astrid frowns.

“I’m not flirting with him, I’m…reminding him that trespassing is illegal.”

“Right, by reading the books he gives you and engaging with his interests—”

“Why does the private tour have to be at three in the morning?” Astrid interrupts because she doesn’t really have a retort for that.

“Obviously so you can have hot sex in a murder alley without worrying about anyone interrupting you.” Ruffnut shrugs off Astrid’s glare. “Like against the wall. I bet he’d be super into that and maybe you’d stop being so obsessive if you got laid.”

Tuffnut nods sagely and Astrid kicks his shin under the table.

“If you’re so into the idea, you go on the stupid tour.”

“He didn’t ask me, though, he asked you.” Ruffnut looks worried, and worse, quietly worried. Years of friendship has taught Astrid that if Ruffnut wants to do anything but set the room on fire and watch it burn, there’s probably something going on that’s worth taking seriously. “Would you go if it were at a different time?”

Astrid shakes her head, emphatic, “no. I don’t know. Maybe.” She sighs pulls Tuffnut’s binder towards herself, flipping through pages of nonsense, “I have questions, I guess.”

“He’s tall right?” Ruffnut grins, “I don’t think the wall would be too difficult to figure out—”

“No, questions about Viggo Grimborn and why so many people are so invested in him. Or the concept of him, because there’s so little real information out there.”

“If only you knew someone offering you a private tour where you could ask those questions.” Ruffnut pushes more gently than normal and Astrid can’t help but see the logic in what she’s saying.

“And deliver a very well put together dossier to someone who should really know the truth before he teaches the masses,” Tuffnut wiggles his eyebrows.

“Now, there’s an idea. You really want me to deliver this to him?” She holds up the binder and he nods.

Well, Hiccup made her read garbage, she can at least return the favor.

“Wait, are you actually going to go?” Ruffnut laughs, “you know, Astrid, this is a pretty bold move. What will you do if you end up having fun? How would you handle that?”

“Very funny.” She scrolls through her contacts and opens a new text thread.
“Are you texting him now?”

“In a minute.”

Astrid (4:52pm): hey so if I told you that I’m going on a 3am murder tour with your cousin, you’d be legally responsible to pass that information along if I show up missing, correct?

Officer Snotlout Jorgenson (4:53pm): if u think ur gonna end up missing maybe dont go

“You’re texting the hot cop?” Ruffnut leans over the table to see, “tell him I say hi.”

“Stop being so nosy,” Astrid hides her screen.

Astrid (4:54pm): no, I’m going to go, just checking

Officer Snotlout Jorgenson (4:54pm): u were so normal

That’s a release, in a way, hearing that she’s not acting normally after she’s committed to what she’s doing. Maybe Ruffnut’s right, maybe she’ll have fun. Maybe it’ll be miserable, but she’ll get her answers about Grimborn-ology answered and she can spend the rest of the time haggling with Hiccup about buying her sound-proof curtains.

She opens up the single text he sent her, a simple ‘hey, this is Hiccup’, and her stomach does a stupid, irrational flip as she answers.

Astrid (4:55pm): Just letting you know I’m ready for that tour.

She’s just getting home from the bar when he responds, a string of texts coming in all at once while she’s trying to set her bag down and get her phone out of her pocket.

Hiccup (6:02pm): Really?
Hiccup (6:02pm): I don’t know why I said that, of course you wouldn’t be texting me if you didn’t mean it
Hiccup (6:02pm): unless this is a joke and I’m ruining the laugh you were going to get out of it, in which case, gotcha
Hiccup (6:03pm): But assuming you’re being serious and that I didn’t deter you by accusing you of lying for no reason, does Saturday work?
Hiccup (6:04pm): oh and sorry for not responding right away

Astrid (6:05pm): To clarify, you mean Saturday at 3am, as in three hours into the day

Hiccup (6:06pm): Yes, the very early part of Saturday that can be reached by staying up very late on Friday night
Hiccup (6:06pm): see? It is an early date
Hiccup (6:07pm): not that it’s a date, I didn’t say that

Astrid’s glad that no one can see her blush when he says that, because her head is still full of all the stupid things Ruffnut said to get a rise out of her. It seems to have worked, unfortunately, because she’s remembering how stunned she was when Hiccup showed up outside her apartment in normal clothes, looking taller and more striking than she remembered.

Astrid (6:08pm): Saturday works

Hiccup (6:09pm): Great! I figure it makes sense to start at your apartment anyway so I’ll meet you there?
Astrid (6:09pm): Sure.

Friday night, Astrid attempts to doze off in front of a movie to at least get a few hours of sleep before whatever idiocy she signed herself up for, but she doesn’t have any luck. Hiccup’s usual eight o’clock tour of the courtyard happened on schedule, but the light drizzle picked up enough he must have had to cancel later tours because she doesn’t hear anyone come by. She half expects him to cancel on her too, maybe even wants him to, but the rain dries up a little past one and she gives up on sleeping.

It’s still cold even if it’s not raining and Astrid layers up, sipping on coffee as she sets Tuffnut’s binder by the door. The knock at 2:57 catches her off guard, and she quickly yanks her boots on before answering.

“Hey!” Hiccup greets in an excited whisper before clearing his throat and continuing in a low voice, “I don’t know if you have any neighbors on this floor, but—”

“Oh, I don’t,” Astrid’s heart stumbles over a beat as this feel stupid all over again, “which I shouldn’t have told you if you’re planning on murdering me.”

“I’m not,” he takes a step back, hands raised, “I meant it when I said you could take me and plus, I’d like to think I’m more creative than that. You know, since you live at the first Grimborn murder site.” He laughs, “not interested in retracing those steps.”

Everything about this is a bad idea.

But like with cheap apartments, Astrid feels better diving in headfirst and committing to the consequences.

“I got you something.”

“What? You really didn’t have to do that.”

“No, I definitely did,” she grabs Tuffnut’s binder and holds it out to him, “one of my friends is apparently interested in the Grimborn murders and he was kind enough to put all his theories in one place. I figured since you made me read about Admiral Haddock, I should return the favor.”

“You read it?” His surprised smile is wide enough that she notices slightly crooked front teeth that only add to the boyish excitement in his eyes. “What did you think?”

“It’s awful, I’m almost finished.” She taps on the binder, “but I think this is likely just as bad, open it.”

“Theodore Roosevelt?” He frowns at a random newspaper clipping about a third of the way in. Something is highlighted and there’s a gold star on the page protector next to the title. “As in the president of the United States?”

“Yep, apparently he’s Viggo Grimborn, his wife was a secret fourth victim, it’s all in there.” She puts on her rain jacket and makes sure her keys are still in the pocket.

“I…can’t wait,” he shuts the binder, grinning wider and tucking it under his arm. Then he fidgets and clears his throat again, “would you mind if I left it here for the tour though?”

“You think you’re coming up here after the tour?” She raises an eyebrow and his eyes widen.

“To be fair, I did say this isn’t a date, so coming back up to your apartment to collect that lovely
binder doesn’t mean anything. Maybe.”

“Sure,” Astrid takes it back and sets it inside before locking up, “you can leave it here. I’m just messing with you.”

“I probably deserve that,” he claps his hands together, “ok, so tour. I was going to assume you’re solid on Elizabeth Smith, given that amazing picture you gave me a copy of, so should we head to the second site?”

“It’s your tour,” she waves him ahead of her on the stairs.

“Eh, since it’s a private tour, it’s more like it’s your tour.” Hiccup holds the door for her anyway and she tucks her hands in her pockets, looking up at her apartment window from the courtyard. It’s quiet, the air still and heavy on the damp, frigid pavement and Astrid shrugs against a rebellious shiver running up her spine.

“You should have let me know, I would have specified that you wear the hat,” she nods at his messy hair and he might blush, or it might be a trick of the moonlight. The street lights went out hours ago and she resists the urge to step closer to pick out the nuances in his expressions. If she got closer, he could see her face too, and she’s not quite sure what it’s saying right now.

“Yeah, that’s kind of just a gimmick,” he grins, “plus, it needs dry cleaning since someone threw a toothbrush at it.”

“I didn’t throw it, for the record.” She cocks her head towards the gate, “onto site two?”

Hiccup is a good tour guide, she’ll give him that. Apparently, she’ll give him more than that since she’s out here in the cold at three in the morning, but he’s making it entertaining. They aren’t twenty yards down the street before he’s listing facts about every doorway and alcove and filling in bits of information she wouldn’t have known to ask for. She keeps expecting to yawn, but the cold and the movement is enough to stave that off. Well, the cold and the entertainment.

“And that brings us to December eighteen eighty-three, where most of Berk had forgotten the trauma of the Smith murder in the rest of the trauma of being a late Victorian slum, that is until the night of the eleventh when a carpenter by the name of Howard Strum heard a shuffle beneath his back window. He thought he heard a woman cry out, but when he asked if anyone was out there, he got no answer,” Hiccup backs up to a hip high gate across a narrow alleyway and offers Astrid his hand, “help over?”

“We’re going back there?” She balks, arms crossed.

“I can’t take usual tours because of the gate, but two people in the middle of the night when everyone’s asleep is a lot less conspicuous.” He climbs over himself, bracing his weight on the gate and making it creak when he stumbles on his left foot, “the carpenter’s house is remodeled but the alley is still the same.”

“And that trespassing?” Astrid is good about people, it’s one of the things that led her down her path in criminology. She kept wondering how obviously awful people got away with things when just being around them set her teeth on edge, and she waits for that instinct to kick in now. She’s stupid enough to be alone with a guy she hardly knows, trespassing into a dark alleyway to check out a murder sight, every bone in her body should be telling her to run, every hair on the back of her neck should be at attention. Really though, her heartbeat is calm and she’s more worried about getting caught than anything as she looks up and down the street, half ready to see
Snotlout in a police cruiser coming to inform her once again that she’s being stupid.

“There’s no ‘No Trespassing’ sign.” Hiccup shrugs a lanky shoulder, “well, not after the apartment block’s HOA made the guy living down here take it down.”

“There’s a padlock.”

“I didn’t see it if you didn’t,” he offers her his hand again and she stares at it. Long fingers, red from cold, seemingly made for gesturing.

“One condition,” she leans on the other side of the gate, checking the street again for cars. “You answer some questions.”

“About trespassing sign laws on this block or about Viggo Grimborn?”

“About you,” she swings her leg over the gate, proud when she doesn’t make it squeak, “and why you think Grimborn is so interesting.”

“About me?”

She didn’t realize he was slouching until he stands up straight, running his hand back through his hair like he wants her to be aware how narrow the alley is, his elbow right in front of her face in the darkness. She steps further into the alley to regain some space, because why not amid all of these other brilliant decisions not unlike those made by people before they get murdered.

“You said it was my tour.”

“I did, I did definitely say that,” his smile is sheepish, teeth white in the last licks of moonlight from the sidewalk as he starts leading her deeper into the alley. Everything about him is confusing, from the shy duck of his head while he taps an obvious padlock with a long finger to the way she feels completely comfortable while everything about this should be threatening. “Usually this stage of the private tour means unlocking Catherine Whittaker’s tragic past and not mine, but…here it is, by the way,” he pauses, pointing down at the ground and up at a new apartment block window. “Where her body was found in the morning by the carpenter who’d heard a bump the night before. Mutilated like Elizabeth’s Smith’s had been.”

Astrid didn’t think Hiccup could do anything more annoying than lead tour groups of murder enthusiasts to look inside her apartment, but in the moment, avoiding eye contact with her is up there.

“Ok, let’s keep moving,” he waves her along with him, taking an abrupt left into another, even narrower alley, hazily lit by outdoor fire alarms near the roofline of two old apartment buildings. “You said you had questions.”

“Yeah,” she nods, “you said usually, how many of these private tours do you give?”

Even though he specified that this wasn’t a date, she could see how that would work. He’s making her feel plenty comfortable when she’s practically trying to be on edge, there’s plenty of time to talk, plenty of privacy in dark alleys. Maybe Ruffnut is more right than she knows.

“This is the third?” He laughs, still awkward, no doubt waiting for her to circle back to his tragic past comment, aware that she’s trying to stall. “The first was Gobber, actually.”

“As in my landlord?” She cocks her head, “so it’s not a move you do or—”
“What? No, unless I was making a move on that condo security guy who paid me quadruple for one a couple years ago, before they put up that monstrosity,” he points behind them at the new apartment block they just turned away from. “Which, come to think of it, he might have thought I was because he kept getting real close to me through here. I don’t think so though, I think he might have just been one of the real weird Grimborn-ologists.”

“There are not weird people who call themselves Grimborn-ologists?”

“You’re looking at one,” he points to his chest with both thumbs as they move out of the alley and back onto a sidewalk. He turns right without thinking and points at a fire hydrant, “that hydrant was used to clean off the alley after Catherine Whittaker’s body was taken to the morgue that used to be in what is now the sheriff’s office.”

“Right, you aren’t weird at all for knowing that.”

“Oh, I am, but by Grimborn standards, I’m positively well-adjusted.”

“You take tours of people to inhabited apartments,” Astrid smacks his upper arm with the back of her hand and it’s not until he’s brushing her off that she realizes how it felt like a habit.

“Ok, this is a story, this is a good one. So, this one time, I got a message from a guy who I’d just been in an online bidding war with for an original Grimborn letter—”

“So normal.”

“I am, just listen, so I get this message and he’s asking if I want to ‘see his collection’,” Hiccup frames the phrase with air quotes, turning to walk backwards while facing her, his hands waving around while he talks, “and I say sure, because I love people’s collections, or I thought I did until this happened. But anyway, I go to this guy’s house and his collection is just…grotesque crime scene photos, but they’re all framed in these fancy custom frames covering a whole wall of his living room and I’m looking at them and he comes up behind me and is breathing over my shoulder and he says, and I quote, ‘I’ve always wanted to see a dead body’.”

“What did you do?”

“Ran,” he laughs, “like I said, noodle arms,” he pats his bicep through his jacket and turns back around to walk next to Astrid, shaking his head, “and that’s an extreme story but a lot of people are actually off their rocker for Viggo Grimborn. There have been copy cat killers and all sorts of people committed for idolizing him, which is absolutely not my thing.”

“Are we um,” she clears her throat, tucking some hair behind her ear and looking up at him from the corner of her eye, “back around to me accidentally uncovering your tragic past?”

“You wanted to know what I find so fascinating about Viggo Grimborn.”

“Well, yeah, because you’re the one giving me a private tour so you’re the one I can ask but just…out of all the cold cases in the world, out of all the unsolved murders, why this one? Why is this the place with tours?”

“I can’t answer that overarching question for you, but I can tell you why I’m so interested,” he licks his lips, looking from her face to the wall above her head, apparently struggling for the words.

“You don’t have to—”

“No, it’s your tour and I don’t know, you do seem to be more directly impacted by my interest than
most.” He grins briefly when she laughs before turning serious again, “my dad was a Captain in
the Berk police force when he was killed in the line of duty. I’d been living with my mom and was
planning on moving in with him to transfer schools and I came anyway, it was too late to change
anything. And yeah, he’d complained about tourists and whackos on the phone, but I didn’t get
why he was so annoyed until I found the book that I gave you in his study and saw my name on the
cover.”

“So, you are named after Admiral Haddock?”

“Oh yeah, my dad was big into genealogy and fought to give me that family name, I think my mom
is still annoyed about it, honestly.” He lights up when he talks about his dad, smile boyish above
that stark jawline as he pauses to gesture to an obviously closed frozen yogurt shop, “right here
used to be the entry to the alley to the third site, but a few years ago, it got rezoned when the fire
hazard law requiring a three foot alley between shale roof buildings was repealed, and obviously
that meant it was time for frozen yogurt. And as if that weren’t bad enough, this alley used to be
the most crime ridden place in Downtown Berk, it’s said that even police officers wouldn’t walk
down it after dark.”

“That’s where all these alleys come from? Fire hazard laws?” Astrid doesn’t think twice before
following Hiccup across the street and down another alley path. He turns right then left, trailing his
hand along the bricks like he’s checking in on them.

“Yep, and you can imagine how hard it made it to chase a murderer down, or anyone down for that
matter.” He pauses, “my dad was a big guy, he used to bitch about trying to fit down here. They’re
why to this day Berk has such a large homeless population, there are so many nooks and crannies
protected from the elements.”

“Huh,” Astrid rests her hand on the building to her right, the way Hiccup is doing, and tries to
imagine if this was where she had to sleep. The ground is mostly dry, at least, but the wind that
occasionally whips past their ankles is brutal.

“Between you and me, that was the reason for the rezoning, it doesn’t have anything to do with
fire.” He says in a low voice, leaning in what should be a little too close, his breath warm on her
cheek. When the hair on the back of her neck stands up, it’s not because she’s scared, and she puts
her hands back in her pockets.

“So, for you, being here and doing this makes you feel close to your dad?”

“It’s comforting that not everything has to be solved,” he shrugs, “you can learn about it, you can
exist within it, you can try to understand it but sometimes, some things just don’t have a solution.”
Hiccup’s sad smile is optimistic and habitual, one he’s used hundreds of times to move forward
when there’s no other option. “Well, again, I have to commend you on getting to the base of my
tragic past in record time, is it my turn?”

“You’re out of luck there, I don’t have a tragic past,” she shakes her head, “just a present merging
with a bunch of other tragedy.”

“You’re absolutely right there,” he turns another corner and knocks on the back of what she
recognizes as the frozen yogurt shop. “Because right here was where a witness watched a young
prostitute named Margaret George lead a tall man in a black hat into her apartment, which was
right over here,” he steps up to the base of new condos and gestures beyond the wall. “About
twenty feet down the sketchiest alley in Berk, she was barely scraping by affording a single room.
This was when the case got really famous as she was a young actress running away from an
arranged marriage. And, because nothing about the way that humans behave has ever really
changed, a pretty face made the case blow up. Her ex-fiance didn’t help, skulking around in black hats and making everyone generally uncomfortable. It also didn’t help that he was a medical student rumored to sell specimens to the anatomy lab.”

“That sounds pretty damning.”

“Maybe that’s the thing about the Grimborn case, there are so many suspects that all make sense. Or as much sense as you can make out of things with very little physical evidence and across more than a hundred years.”

The walk towards the fourth site is through more alleys, all of which Hiccup navigates without thought, pointing out landmarks, hemming and hawing across descriptions of mutilations he seems to know better than to offer to show Astrid pictures of.

“You must think I’m a wimp for not wanting to see the gore,” she elbows him in the ribs, not quite sure when she started walking close enough to do so.

“No, not at all, I’m not so into it myself. That’s where a lot of people get hung up, the mutilating part of the murders that is, but focusing on it too much just seems cruel to me. They were people,” he shudders, “plus, I can’t say I have the best experience with women who really want to see the pictures.”

“What does that mean?”

“I mean they’re out here looking for their Johnny Depp, or something,” he shuffles back when he laughs, wheezy, quiet enough that she wouldn’t hear it if she still weren’t standing far too close, “although how anyone romanticizes being strangled—”

Astrid jumps at the scream that cuts him off, wincing at the thud that follows. Heavy, intentional. There’s a rustle and then obvious, heavy silence sets in, only interrupted by Hiccup’s arm curling around her shoulders.

She looks up, embarrassed for hiding in his neck, itching to shrug his arm off but frozen in place by something she can’t quite place. Maybe it’s his expression, hard and focused, straight jaw at eye level while his eyebrows knit together, electric eyes honed to a deadly, perceptive current. He’s warm, especially for how skinny he is, and it makes her feel cold enough to want to get closer.

“Well,” she clears her throat, “you really went all out on the ambiance for this not a date.”

“I have no idea what that was,” he mutters, voice low and careful, “we should get out of here. Now.”
Chapter 6

Hiccup doesn’t realize his arm is still around Astrid’s shoulders until the front door of her apartment building is securely shut behind them, the hallway quiet except for his heart pounding in his ears and the echo of a scream rattling around his brain.

“Sorry,” he lets go of her arm, hand hanging awkwardly at his side, “I didn’t, um—”

“What do you think that was?” Astrid looks back over her shoulder as she climbs the stairs, keys jingling in her hand. “Should we report it?”

“What like call the cops and say someone screamed downtown?” He follows her, too addled to feel uninvited and too warm from walking back so quickly. He unzips his jacket as she unlocks her front door and leaves it open behind her. “Last time I checked, screaming isn’t illegal.”

“Have you seen the noise violation laws?” She kicks her boots off and starts pacing back and forth in her living room. The walls are bare aside from a single frame that holds what looks like a diploma and the only furniture is a chair and a beat-up coffee table. It looks less like the crime scene photos with Astrid living in it, vibrant and not as scared as she probably should be. Gearing up for a fight more than running from one.

“Have you?”

“Yes, the new ones are extensive,” she pauses to stare at him, blinking a couple of times to herself, “right, Tuffnut’s dossier.”

“Whose what?”

“My friend, Tuffnut,” she hands him the binder from a stool by the door serving as another tiny table, “that’s what he calls his dumb Grimborn theory binder.”

“Oh, right. Thanks.” He tucks it under his arm and looks down at the toes of his shoes butted up against the threshold to her apartment. “So umm…that wasn’t quite how I wanted to end that tour, but are you ready to subscribe to my daily Grimborn text service? It’s free for the first week.”

Astrid has an uncanny way of catching his eye even when he’s trying to avoid hers. More than that, he doesn’t feel his usual urge to shut her out when she sees through him too easily, past whatever front he put up to keep her back. Maybe his fronts aren’t up to their usual standard though, because he kind of likes feeling like something she’s trying to figure out.

He’s used to being the one with the clues, but when she treats him like a curious piece of a puzzle she’s trying to put together, it makes him interested in the final product.

“How did you want to end it?”

“I don’t know, my usual lecture about how safe Berk is now,” he tucks his hand in his pocket, “like the buildings themselves learned from the blood and I don’t know, it probably wouldn’t have worked on you.”

“That’s really corny,” she rests her hand on the doorknob, “I still think we should tell someone what we heard.”

“Tell you what, I’ll check it out on my way home, it’s right on the way.”
Astrid’s frown is impossibly familiar even if it’s not directed at him this time, more through him, and his heart stutters when he realizes it’s protective.

“You’re walking home?” She tucks her hair behind an ear that sticks out adorably far, “shouldn’t you get an Uber or something? Or ask your cousin for a ride?”

“Right, like Snotlout would give me a ride,” he scoffs. Snotlout would, of course, but it’d be more painful than it’s worth.

Plus, Hiccup has been exploring those alleys for five years now and he’s never heard anything like that. Sure, he’s been mugged once or twice, but those people were just desperate and once he started helping with Gobber’s shelter and gaining some notoriety, people just started asking him for help instead of taking what they thought they could.

Astrid’s frown deepens and it scares him when her eyes flick to her lonely chair, like she feels like she has to invite him inside. It’s not that he doesn’t want to stay longer and maybe level out the playing field a bit, given he told her about his dad and he hardly gave her a chance to talk, but well, echoing screams in Berk alleys have forced him on her enough.

“Are you worried about me?” He teases, flinching when she smacks his upper arm hard enough that he almost drops the binder. Or no, the dossier.

“That’s for taking me on a really creepy tour at a really creepy time.”

“That’s…fair—” He guesses it’s about time for something about this tour to be normal, and a stinging arm traded for Berk to go back to the generally safe place he knows doesn’t seem like too much of a trade.

Then she kisses him on the cheek, quickly like she’s hoping he’ll miss it, like that’s a possibility in any reality. When she pulls back her face is red, bright against blooming circles under her eyes as she steps back, leaning on the doorknob.

“That’s for everything else.” Astrid mutters something that sounds like an amalgamation of ‘goodnight’ and ‘good morning’ and ‘goodbye’ and shuts the door, once again leaving him with a click and his own awkward hands and pounding heartbeat.

It’s still dark outside, the buildings blocking even the idea of dawn on the horizon, and if it weren’t for the heavy binder under Hiccup’s arm, he might believe that none of that just happened. From Astrid saying she’d go on a tour in the first place to asking about him instead of Viggo and mostly, to the scream they heard that cut everything short. He offered to check it out mostly hoping that Astrid would drop it and not inform the police where they were, since they were technically trespassing on condo conglomerate territory, but now he’s curious. Curious and way too restless to go home and try and sleep before his next set of tours.

They were almost to the fourth site when they heard the scream, so he takes a shortcut, skirting through a torn section of six-foot chain link behind a new construction site and ducking under a semi full of lumber that’s blocking a wide, modern alley. He can hear the broken ‘Closed’ sign in the Ripped Tavern’s back window shorting from the rain, flashes of red light pulsing along with a blooming feeling of dread in Hiccup’s chest as he turns the corner and freezes, staring at the shadow under the street lamp.

Blood looks black in yellow light. Hiccup remembers the stain on the pavement after his father was taken to the hospital, brick red then chalky like a blackboard under the halogen buzz. This blood is fresh though, steaming on the cold concrete as it draws a stark line to the drain.
“Hello?” He calls out, stepping hesitantly forward then running when he thinks he sees movement. He’s on his knees beside the body before he realizes it was a trick of the light, his brain shielding him from something he doesn’t want to make sense of.

Unlike some worse-adjusted Grimborn enthusiasts out there, Hiccup has seen a dead body. Once, when he was twenty and shaky, a splotch on pavement engraved into the insides of his eyelids, and it wasn’t an experience he ever wanted to repeat.

This isn’t a repetition, it’s an expansion.

An anatomy lesson he didn’t sign up for, glittering with high budget HBO special effects instead of the sepia tone of a century between the camera’s snap and his own understanding. He jumps to his feet and staggers backwards, dropping everything in his hands and leaning against the nearest wall. It makes more sense from here, Mary Johnson, Grimborn’s last confirmed victim, sprawled out and cut open. Dispersed.

But it’s not Mary Johnson. The longer Hiccup looks, the clearer he can think, and the bolt of recognition jabs him again.

It’s the homeless woman he escorted to the shelter last week. What was her name? She was going through a divorce, she was... Jennifer. That’s it. Jennifer something, did she give him a last name? He doesn’t remember.

His phone buzzes in his pocket and he fumbles for it, seeing Snotlout’s name on the caller ID and picking up with a shaking hand.

“So am I interrupting you and Astrid having—”

“There’s a body,” Hiccup’s own calm voice shocks him. He doesn’t feel calm, or maybe he does, maybe the shock is fading into something analytical.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“I was on my way home and earlier we heard something funny, so I came to see what it was and there’s a body.”

“What? Like a dead body?” Snotlout pauses whatever he was doing in the background of the call and suddenly, Hiccup can make out the sound of tires on the salted road ahead and feet on the sidewalk. Splashes of red and blue light swirling on the walls. “Did you call the cops or just get straight to studying it, fucking hell, Hiccup—”

“Looks like they’re already here.”

“Fuck, I’m on my way,” Snotlout hangs up and Hiccup barely has time to get his phone back in his pocket before an officer is rounding the corner, flashlight flicking between the woman on the ground and Hiccup’s face.

Hiccup puts his hands up slowly and calls out, “I don’t suppose it would do anything for me if I told you I could explain, would it?”

One time when he was fifteen and deep into his Houdini phase, Hiccup handcuffed himself and tossed the key out the window. His dad was furious, it was one of the few times Hiccup thought that the offer to let him try and Houdini himself out of an actual jail cell was legitimate. Instead, he had to spend his allowance on a metal detector to scan the street for the key and ultimately found it in a storm drain and had to spend more money on a magnet powerful enough to pull it out. It was
an expensive enough hassle that he considers it an unintended consequence that followed being handcuffed, and since faux fur lined handcuffs don’t incur unintended consequences, he would say that this is technically the second time he’s been in cuffs.

It’s less stressful than his second time seeing a dead body. He didn’t do anything wrong besides some mild trespassing and they give him coffee at the station, which he knows to be a gesture of good faith from all the times his dad made him deliver coffee as a gesture of good faith.

Snotlout makes his best case for uncuffing him, but gets shut down and sent to his desk, so Hiccup spends the next hour stuck to a table in an interrogation room, nursing cold coffee and trying his best to remember what he saw for a witness statement. They have his phone, so he doesn’t know what time it is when a detective finally enters, but the man’s expression leads Hiccup to believe it’s still uncomfortably early in the morning.

Early. Astrid. Crap, he didn’t get a chance to tell her, she’s going to hear about this on the news. She’s probably going to hear about him on the news.

“Detective Eretson,” he introduces himself, shaking Hiccup’s cuffed right hand and sitting down across the table with a manila folder. “You told your arresting officer that you had an explanation —”

“I do, I was just on my way home——”

“At four forty-five in the morning?”

“I, uh, well it wasn’t a date but——”

“I’m not here to ask you about your social life, Mr. Haddock, I’m here to ask how you came to be standing above this woman so soon after she was murdered that she was still warm.” Detective Eretson slides a crime scene photo across the table, the flash illuminating what Hiccup could only guess at in the dark. “Do you have an explanation for how you got to the crime scene so quickly?”

“I wasn’t that far away,” he tries to gesture but the cuffs catch a couple inches above the table, “I was going from 324 Harbor street to the north side of East street, just past the park, I took a shortcut and well, you know the rest.”

Detective Eretson nods, unconvinced, and there’s a knock at the door a split second before it opens and Snotlout sticks his head in.

“Can I get you anything?”

“Coffee,” the detective barks without looking up.

“Ok, I was talking to the witness, but you could say please.”

“Two coffees, Snotl—Officer Jorgenson.” Hiccup glares at his cousin, “please.”

“How do you know Officer Jorgenson?” The detective asks as soon as the door is shut again and Hiccup folds his hands together.

“Is that pertinent to this investigation?” He clears his throat, “sir.”

Detective Eretson would be intimidating in any circumstance, but the combination of his chin tattoo and intensely unamused gaze in particular makes the chill around Hiccup’s wrists sink in deeper, reminding him there’s no way out of this but through. And the noodle arms thing is still
unfortunately true, not that Snotlout’s gym time would make him any better at busting out of here right now.

Thinking of Snotlout makes him appear, sloshing coffee down his arm as he wrestles the door open and walks inside. He sets the half empty cup in front of Detective Eretson and stands arms crossed at the side of the table, making no move to leave as the door shuts itself.

“Can I help you with something?” Eretson asks without looking and Snotlout huffs.

“I don’t know, can you?” He grumbles before standing up straighter, on tip toes if Hiccup isn’t mistaken. “I was on the phone with the witness at the time he discovered the body, I requested to assist in the interrogation—Interview. The interview”

Great, it’s an interrogation, that’s excellent news.

“I thought you weren’t on duty today,” Eretson sounds like he prefers that concept and Hiccup tries to get Snotlout to leave with an important look at the door.

“I’m not, and I’m not asking for overtime, it’s called over-achieving, look it up.”

“If we could just get on with this interview,” Hiccup hedges and Eretson stares at him for a second before turning back to his folder.

“What’s this?” He pulls out another photo of a non-descript gray binder and Hiccup’s face goes pale.

“It’s a dossier.” His voice cracks, “detailing a friend of a friend’s theory about Viggo Grimborn, it’s a joke.”

Snotlout’s glare bores into the side of Hiccup’s head and he tries to scratch his temple, only to have his wrists catch on the cuffs again.

“Viggo Grimborn?” Eretson frowns and Snotlout leans back against the wall, obviously on tip toes now, arms crossed tight as he refuses to even make eye contact with Hiccup.

“Oh, you don’t know who Viggo Grimborn is? That’s not one of the many infinite things that you know?”

“He was a serial killer in the late eighteen hundreds, I know the alleys so well because I am a Viggo Grimborn tour guide who does an informational tour about him, that’s how I knew about the short cut. Snotlout is my cousin and roommate and he called to ask when I was coming home, that snapped me out of my…utter and complete shock at what I’d found and then an officer came around the corner—”

“We had a tip of a disturbance in the area,” Detective Eretson looks levelly at Hiccup for a second, “while you were taking your shortcut, did you see anyone else?”

“No, I didn’t. I mean, except for Jennifer’s body—“

“You watched that without me?” Snotlout hisses and Eretson slams his hand on the table.

“Jorgenson, out!”

“You are not my commanding officer, actually—“

“And you can thank your lucky stars for that,” Eretson stands up and opens the door, looking
pointedly at Snotlout until he goes reluctantly flat-footed. “You’re interrupting my investigation with a suspect that you know, is that something I should tell your commanding officer about?”

“No,” Snotlout deflates, looking at Hiccup one more time before trudging out of the room.

“Sorry about him,” Hiccup tries when Eretson closes the door, but there’s no sign that the detective hears him as he crosses the room again and slams his hand down, next to Hiccup’s cuffed ones. His looming should be intimidating or even frightening, but Hiccup feels disconnected from it, like he’s watching it instead of living it. Like he’s still back in that alley, seeing the future play out.

“You recognized the victim?” His voice is low and serious, toeing the line too carefully to be deadly.

“Yes—“

“So I’m supposed to take it on faith that you know the alleys because you do a serial killer informational tour and on your way home at odd hours, you stumbled across the body of someone you happen to know?”

“Know is an overstatement,” Hiccup tries to gesture again, the chain catching and clanging against the table, “I walked her to the shelter the other night, she was arguing with one of those Neighborhood Watch Force wannabes about crossing the center of town while they were trying to say curfew. Gobber, the guy who runs the shelter, can vouch for me. That’s the only time I’ve ever met her—“

“But you recognized the body—“

“Yeah, apparently I have a photographic memory when I’m in shock,” he laughs, feeling frantic and suddenly needing to escape, “every day you learn something new.”

“Well,” Eretson pulls a key ring from the pocket of his slacks and flicks past a couple of near identical keys to find an all too familiar one. Hiccup rubs his wrists when the cuffs fall away, because he’s seen people in movies do it, and maybe it’ll help with the bands of bone deep chill or the soreness from accidentally flexing against metal one too many times. “I’ll be looking into your alibi.”

“But I’m free to go?” Hiccup stands up, stumbling on his numb right foot and catching himself on the table. He has to pee, but he’ll go in a bush outside and risk a second arrest for public nudity before he stays inside the station a second longer than he has to.

“For now,” Eretson opens the door but stands in the way, looking Hiccup up and down like there’s a clue stuck to him that just hasn’t been spotted yet. “Don’t leave town.”

“I’ll cancel my knitting retreat then,” the last shred of Hiccup’s patience evaporates as he slips around the detective, running his hand through his hair and stalking towards the front door of the station. Someone at the front desk stops him and gets his information, like they don’t have that already. They give him his phone back too, but the case is on upside down, like someone tried to unlock it a little too diligently.

Snotlout is outside talking to a coworker Hiccup doesn’t recognize, but he immediately jogs over when he sees Hiccup heading for home.

“What’s going on?”

“What’s going on?” Hiccup laughs, slamming his hand against the crosswalk button with a little
too much force. “Detective Eretson will be checking into my alibi.”

“Right, which is no, you weren’t murdering anyone, you were giving some girl a tour of places someone else murdered people,” Snotlout throws his arms up, “fantastic!”

“Astrid,” Hiccup stops short, patting his sides like he somehow stashed the binder in a pocket he forgot about until now, “the binder—“

“Is evidence because it’s a creepy handmade book found at a murder scene,” Snotlout catches Hiccup’s shoulder when he tries to turn into a familiar alley, “where are you going?”

“Home,” He gestures, wincing at the dull pain in his wrist, “it’s quicker this way.”

“Yeah and the last time you took a sketchy shortcut, you got arrested—“

“It’s not sketchy, it’s just cutting around the stupid condos that I hate to look at,” Hiccup sighs when Snotlout steps into the mouth of the alley and crosses his arms. “You know, no one notices that you’re shorter than them until you start with the tiptoes thing.”

“Yeah, and no one notices that you’re weird until you show up at a crime scene with a book about murders.” He snorts, “oh wait, they already knew you were weird, never mind.” He only crosses his arms tighter when Hiccup bends his knees, threatening to dodge around him. “Just walk the long way past the stupid condos.”

Hiccup stands back up straight and runs his hand through his hair, tugging and lamenting how much longer it’s going to take to get home and rinse the interrogation room and murder alley scum off.

“Detective Eretson is really under your skin, huh?” He starts walking again and Snotlout almost doesn’t follow. “Oh come on, are you going to take the shortcut?

“Maybe.”

“You know you always get lost back there.” Hiccup points up at the condo rooftop, “If you’re making me walk past those monstrosities, at least come with me.”

“Fine,” Snotlout gets all of two steps down the sidewalk before he’s ranting, “and I don’t know who Eretson thinks he is, he’s been here all of five minutes, he doesn’t even know who Virgo Grimdeath—“

“Viggo Grimborn, he’s not an astrology card—“

“Whatever, he doesn’t even know who he is and he thinks he owns the place. And he’s got the stupid accent and the muscles and he’s like eighty feet tall—”

“Do you hate him or have a crush on him?”

“Shut up, Hiccup,” Snotlout narrows his eyes, “you’re a little tall yourself to be messing with me right now. Toeing the line between normal and too tall,” he snorts, “well, toeing halfway.”

“Was that really necessary?” Hiccup shakes his head, looking out at the bay to avoid glaring up at the condo façade. A seagull is eating some leavings from a gutted fish and it makes him think of what he saw in the alley and he glares at Snotlout to avoid gagging.

“We’re even.” Snotlout flexes his arm, “and it’s not all bad, I’ve been going to the gym a lot more
lately because Eretson was acting like he owned the place—“

“No one thought you were a stripper, Snotlout, I don’t buy it.”

“Yeah, and you got a date with a hot girl who called you a hair fetishist, crazier things have happened.”

Hiccup doesn’t have an answer to that right away and they walk the next few blocks in silence. The earliest commuter traffic is starting to pile up on the road and the sun feels a little too bright, scalding through Hiccup’s retinas and reminding him how long he’s been awake.

“It wasn’t a date,” Hiccup stands back to let Snotlout unlock the front door of the apartment, following him in and immediately losing the mental battle not to flop into his dad’s old leather chair. He’ll clean the murder gunk off of it later. Maybe. He should have peed before sitting down but the night is catching up all at once. “She did kiss me though.”

“What?” Snotlout sets his holster on the table by the door. “And you don’t believe that one person thought I was a stripper? But I’m supposed to believe that a girl as hot as Astrid kissed you?”

“On the cheek,” Hiccup reaches up to touch his face, the static of the dry brush of Astrid’s lips lingering even though the rest of the morning, warm where the rest of him is cold, like the handcuffs chilled more than just his wrists.

“Wait, like your cheek or your actual cheek?” Snotlout raises an eyebrow and gestures at his own ass, “like am I impressed or did the middle school dance go really well?”

“My cheek on my face,” Hiccup pulls his right shoe off and lobs it at Snotlout, missing by a few inches. It leaves mud on the wall and out of the corner of his eye it looks like blood.

“Oh, so it’s lame—“

“I don’t know why I tell you anything.”

“Because if you don’t talk you explode?” Snotlout snickers, finally setting his badge on top of his other uniform accessories and walking towards the bathroom. Dammit. “I’m going to bed, dude.”

“Sounds good.”

He pauses and looks back, “you’re good about, you know, seeing the dead person, right? Because you know after I had to respond to that thing with the train I was all kinds of freaked out,” he finishes the thought with a shudder. And as annoying and overbearing and nosy, and oh, disgusting, as Snotlout can be, Hiccup feels the genuine warmth of his concern.

“Nah, I’m good, I see pictures all the time, right?”

“It’s not the same.”

“No. It’s not.”

He must fall asleep at some point because he wakes up to his phone buzzing in his pocket, a string of texts coming through all at once.

Astrid (12:00pm): Murder?
Astrid (12:02pm): we heard a murder?
Chapter 7

“Well, you didn’t sleep,” Ruffnut wastes no time in announcing her assessment of Astrid’s appearance when she sits down across the table.

“No, I didn’t.”

“Oh, really?” She raises an eyebrow, and usually Astrid would be embarrassed. Usually she’d deny whatever Ruffnut was implying, because true or not, feeling read when she doesn’t want to be is unwelcome. “I meant it in the ‘you look like a still warm corpse’ way, but do you mean it in a fun way?”

“Can I ask you something?”

“I’m sure it’s normal, you can be kind of intimidating when fully clothed,” she snickers.

“No, I’m being serious.” Astrid folds her hands on the table. “Do I scare easy?”

“Not where I would have hoped this was going, but you knew it was a gamble—"

“No, answer my question, Ruff. Do I look like someone who gets scared of a bump in the dark and huddles against a guy and then kisses him on the cheek before he leaves?”

“On the cheek? Is that a euphemism?”

“I kissed him on the cheek.” Astrid wonders if saying it out loud could enable her to rewrite that part of the past but she isn’t sure she wants to. Maybe she wants to be convinced into it, to be reminded what a bad idea this all is.

Maybe she should have called Fishlegs.

No, he was surprisingly excited about her stupid midnight tour. Maybe she should have called Officer Jorgenson, as he’s reliably been the only one volunteering to talk sense into her.

“That’s kind of cute,” Ruffnut wrinkles her nose, ordering a mimosa from a passing waiter.

“No, it’s not. I’m—he’s basically harassing me, Ruff, he’s giving tours to my apartment.”

“Including private tours that you agree to go on?”

Astrid bites her lip, avoiding that obviously rhetorical question and debating whether to bring up the scream or not. She feels bad for how little she remembers it, how it feels like a ghost from a nightmare she chased off well enough to fall back asleep. She knows it was real, she felt it in her numb fingertips, her sinking stomach, and she’s not someone who loses a moment like that to a stupid, awkward kiss. Worse even, a kiss on the cheek of a guy who shines laser pointers in her apartment window but won’t walk through the open door without an invitation.

“He was excited to read Tuff’s stupid binder,” she sidesteps the end of the tour as best she can, “it’s what he deserves for making me read that Admiral Haddock nonsense.”

“Right, making you.” Ruffnut rolls her eyes, “you know that you don’t just have to read every book that crosses your threshold, right? You could use the next one to fix your coffee table so that it stops wobbling, even.”
“Usually I’d be offended, but the Admiral Haddock book is bad enough I’d consider it,” she lies.

Maybe she would have before Hiccup told her about his dad. The open way that he talked about self-professed trauma is sticking with her alongside screams and stupid kisses.

“You know it’s ok if you had a good time with him, right? Even if he has awful taste in hats, you could still like him, even.” Ruffnut prods, unusually gentle, and Astrid looks at the TV above her head.

“He didn’t wear the hat.”

“Bummer.” Ruffnut focuses on the menu then and Astrid focuses on the news, the narrow alleyways in the broadcast almost familiar after last night.

“In the early hours of the morning, the body of a woman was found, all signs pointing to foul play…” The news caster drones on in an unfeeling monotone and Astrid recognizes one of the buildings behind her as the building that Hiccup pointed out for replacing Catherine Whittaker’s murder site, right near where they were when they heard the scream. The scream and the thud and the deafening, heavy silence that followed.

“Oh my god,” she fumbles for her phone, frantically shooting off a few too many texts at Hiccup.

“Good mimosas, right?” Ruffnut nods, “I love that we no longer, as a people, have to choose between chicken or waffles. It’s both now. The future is here.”

“I have to go,” Astrid stands up, calling Hiccup and pressing the phone to her ear even as Ruffnut complains about being left alone at the table. “Pick up, pick up, pick up.”

“Hey, Astrid. Hi, Astrid—”

“Did we hear,” she lowers her voice when she notices the hostess looking at her suspiciously, “did we have anything to do with what I just saw on the news?”

“That’s a really long story,” he laughs but the sound is heavy and tired.

“Well, I think given the circumstances, I can clear out my schedule to hear it,” she hisses, sitting down on the bench by the restaurant’s front door.

“Ok, that’s umm, I need an hour? Can you meet me at the Ripped then?”

She checks the time on the clock above the hostess stand, “I’ll be there.”

“What was all that about?” Ruffnut asks when Astrid sits back down and picks up her menu. She’s too scattered to read so she decides on the first item she sees.

“Nothing.” As ready to bury a body as Ruffnut was when she first moved in, it’s not an offer she’d actually ever take her up on. “I have to meet Hiccup in an hour.”

“Have to? So much obligation already, sexy.”

“It’s not like that,” Astrid fidgets under the scrutiny. She’s not good with being judged for other people’s actions, and she’s even worse with secrets.

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Hiccup is waiting outside of the Ripped Tavern when Astrid gets there, chatting with Snotlout,
who is almost unrecognizable out of uniform. Plain clothes or not, though, he’s still a cop and she feels stupid for texting Hiccup written evidence of what they’d heard.

“Hey,” Hiccup waves when he sees her, his energy frantic in comparison with the circles under his eyes and the sallow tinge to his face, like he didn’t sleep either.

“You!” Snotlout points at her and she takes a step back, “you were there, you can tell him.”

“I was where?” She shakes her head, “what are you talking about?” Was Hiccup stupid enough to tell his cop cousin that the heard something and didn’t report it? That’s the quickest way to involve themselves in whatever happened.

“You were at your apartment when your friend thought I was a stripper, Hiccup doesn’t believe me.”

“Oh, right, I’m sorry about that.” Astrid hates that she has to apologize for Ruffnut, but if Hiccup did open his big stupid mouth, she doesn’t have much of a choice aside from groveling, “Ruffnut is…something, I don’t know what got into her. I never do.”

“Don’t be sorry,” he looks back at Hiccup, “see, I told you?”

“Wait,” Hiccup frowns, green eyes boring into Astrid’s like he’s trying to see through an obvious lie, “your friend called Snotlout a stripper? Really?”

“Entirely unprompted, I don’t know how she’s survived this long.” She tucks her hair behind her ear and glances at Snotlout, trying to ask the question she needs to without saying it, “are you staying? Or…”

“Nah, I’ve got to get to work, I just needed to prove a point.” He pats Hiccup on the chest, “told you so.”

Hiccup waits until Snotlout is across the street before speaking, hands in his pockets, “so did you plan an elaborate scheme with Snotlout so that he could brag at me about someone thinking he was a stripper?”

“Not at all, my friend is really that stupid, I thought she was going to get us both arrested,” she laughs, relieved in a way that doesn’t make sense given what she came to talk about with him. It’s the same calm she felt the night before, like being closer is better than further away.

“Right, like Snotlout would arrest you, especially for what he weirdly perceives to be a compliment.” He laughs, shrugging a bouncy shoulder at her.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, you know, because umm,” he waves a hand at her, “because you’re so—you know, because you look like…you happen to look.” His sallow cheeks are suddenly bright red, highlighting a sprinkling of winter pale freckles on his cheeks, and Astrid realizes she hasn’t seen him outside in the daylight before.

“That’s not particularly ethical,” she mumbles.

“Well, uh, neither is Snotlout sometimes. I guess.” He laughs, “want to go inside?”

Maybe it’s his awkward, hopeful expression or because this is so different than the usual midnight, often intrusive situations where they run into each other, but she digs her heels into the cement
before answering.

“You remember what I’m here to talk to you about, right? This isn’t a date—”

“Honestly, I could use a drink to avail you of my last twelve hours of adventure,” he opens the door.

“Ok, but should we talk about this in public?” She looks over her shoulder, half expecting Snotlout to be listening or someone to see the actual meaning behind ‘this’. Murder. The murder that they heard happen, more likely than not.

“Don’t worry, no one will bother me in here,” he grins, quietly, cryptically reassuring as he waves her inside.

The Ripped Tavern is as hokey as always, but more depressing given the time of day and the fact that the brunette behind the bar glares at Hiccup as he walks in. There’s a strip of police caution tape across the side door where Hiccup’s tour starts, and he chooses a table at the opposite corner of the bar, under a rack of Viggo Grimborn tee-shirts for sale, ten percent off. A busboy takes their order and Astrid sticks with soda, still sober from the news at brunch and wanting to stay that way until she has answers.

“Are you going to tell me what’s going on?” Astrid snaps after Hiccup has painstakingly cleared all of the foam off of his beer, staring pensively into the glass and spinning it slowly in his long fingers.

“Yeah, I just—trying to figure out where to start, I guess.” He chews on his lower lip with crooked teeth and glances at the caution tape over the door that might as well be purposeful décor.

“How about you start when you left my place?” She rests her elbows on the table and leans forward, conscious of eyes on the back of her neck.

“Because that route ends in me explaining how I got arrested, and I’m not sure I can pull off the kind of bad boy charisma I’d need to get away with that.”

“You got arrested?” Astrid hisses and Hiccup starts rubbing one of his wrists, bringing her attention to a faded red line across the bony point of it.

“I was at the wrong place at the wrong time,” his floppy hair hangs over his forehead as he stares into his beer, “I told you I’d check out what we heard—”

“And I told you to get an Uber.”

“Well, I didn’t, and I went to check it out—”

“The scream, you mean,” she hugs herself against the chill running up her arms, even under her jacket.

Hiccup shrugs, seeing something in his memory that makes him pale, “yeah. And I stumbled across, well, I—right out there,” he points at the caution tape, “and I was right on time, of course, the cops found me standing over a body.”

For someone who delightedly hands around crime scene photos, he looks upset, and she thinks back to the night before when he said he doesn’t like to focus on the gore. Apparently, that wasn’t just a really weird line.
“Are you ok?” She reaches reflexively across the table to rest her hand on his.

“What? Yeah, I’m fine.” He shakes his head but doesn’t move his hand, like he thinks she doesn’t notice what she’s doing and he doesn’t want to alert her. “But it looked pretty suspicious, I’ll give that to them.”

“Another round?” A voice interrupts and Astrid jumps back, unsure when she got so close.

“No,” Hiccup points at his mostly full beer with the hand Astrid just abandoned, “I’m good, Heather.”

The brunette bartender lingers then, pursing her lips before setting her empty tray on the table next door and squatting down next to Hiccup. She’s beautiful, in a sharp sort of way, and she looks at Hiccup like she wants him to be aware of her jagged edges.

“Can I talk to you?” Her green eyes flick to Astrid for a judgmental second. “Alone.”

“Anything you have to say to me, you can say in front of Astrid.” Hiccup rolls his eyes, his previous certainty that no one would disrupt him here obviously overblown.

“I can give you two a minute—” Astrid starts to stand up but Hiccup follows.

“Oh, we’re leaving? Sounds good.”

“Fine,” Heather huffs, looking suspiciously at Astrid one last time, “did you hear what happened last night?”

“Hear about it?” Hiccup rolls his eyes, “you could say that.”

“What do you think?” Heather looks at the side door, “it was right by the storm drain, from what I saw from the back door.”

“You saw it?” Hiccup is pale again and it makes Astrid want to get up and leave, knowing that apparently, he’ll follow.

“Yeah, and the placement of the intestine—”

“Let’s not talk about intestines right now, God, Heather.” He wrinkles his nose, “I had the split-second Mary Johnson thought too, but that’s because we give tours on it every single night.”

“Well, there’s no way no one else is going to think it when those pictures get out.” Heather cocks her head, weighing what she’s about to say, “I’m just saying there’s reason to think there might be an uptick in business around here—”

“A woman died—”

“I’m not ignoring that,” Heather stands up slowly and Astrid can’t help but glance up at the Grimborn shirts for sale. No, she isn’t ignoring that women died. She’s working somewhere that profits on it. “It’s awful, I know it’s awful, I can’t wait until the cops catch and lock up whoever did it but I’m trying to pay rent here and we’re going to lose a couple weeks of tours, at least.”

“And you want me to come back and do the nine and eleven,” Hiccup rolls his eyes and chugs the rest of his beer, “and tell everyone about the ghost of Johann, resurrected after over a hundred years and striking again?”

“You can use your own script, Hiccup, I’m just asking a favor—”
“Not a chance,” he stands up, nonchalantly offering Astrid his hand and pulling her to her feet, “put these on my tab, alright?”

“You don’t have a tab,” Heather’s face is hard again, irritated with an argument she’s lost before.

“I know for a fact that Dagur still keeps my tab,” Hiccup waves over his shoulder as he leaves through the front door, dropping Astrid’s hand as soon as they’re outside. “I hate it when she’s right,” he grumbles at his phone and Astrid frowns.

“What are you talking about?” She doesn’t like feeling behind, and it’s worse that Hiccup seems to be so good at leaving her that way.

“I have to cancel my tours for tonight, the crime scene is at the very beginning of my route.” He types something and presses send.

“How do you know her?” Astrid tucks her hands in her jacket pocket, leaning away from him slightly. She should be asking more about last night, about the murder, about him being arrested, but he keeps flinging mysteries at her faster than she can parse through.

“Long story.”

“You’re full of those, aren’t you?”

“Sometimes it feels that way,” he looks up at the winter sun, jaw casting a shadow on his neck, “here, I’ll walk you home, if you want. I don’t have a tour to wait around here for.”

“You just can’t go a single day without seeing my apartment,” she sighs but starts walking slowly anyway, waiting for him to fall into step beside her. Usually, she’d insist that she doesn’t need anyone to walk her home but being this close to the site of a murder she overheard is making her unusually wary. Not scared, but wary enough to embrace the fact that she feels more comfortable next to Hiccup.

“What can I say? It’s a nice place.”

“It’s a shitty apartment,” she reminds him with a level look and he shrugs, “so, Heather.”

“You know, I wasn’t kidding when I said she usually leaves me alone,” his smile is barely there and about as close to cruel as she thinks his face can get, “must mean she’s really hurting for money.”

“She owns the bar?”

“Her brother does, technically, and they both own Berserker Grimborn tours, where I used to work until Heather stole all of my notes on Trader Johann and started preaching them as truth in her tours.” Hiccup looks at Astrid, ravenous curiosity tinged with blatant respect, “how’d you learn about Johann anyway? I keep meaning to ask.”

“He kept showing up in interviews and his bible advertisements got bigger in the paper after the second murder, like he was making money off of them or something. And it lined up and I hadn’t heard of anyone else suggesting the theory,” she shrugs. The archives feel worlds away, along with the downright aggressive effort she made to solve the Grimborn case and make Hiccup reroute his tour. She blames the lack of sleep and trauma of overhearing a murder for the fact that she’s suddenly so ok with him walking her to her doorstep.

“And the ‘All Safe’ message?”
"I told you, it’s Al. I,” she corrects, “the murder in my apartment wasn’t connected.”

“I love that you have a theory,” he grins and bumps his shoulder against hers, comfortable when it’s about Grimborn, like he had been the night before. It makes her want to ask about him about himself again, just to throw him off. “But I mean the picture, where did you find that?”

“I have a part-time work-study job in the archives.”

“And you just spent a bunch of time combing through Berk Enquirers to find a mythically rare picture?” He’s a tour guide now too, she realizes, weaving the conversation in and out of goalposts on the way to its original destination. He’s not avoiding what he saw last night, he’s leading her to it slowly. She doesn’t like it anymore now than she did on his original tour, she’d rather have all the information at once and work through it herself.

“You don’t get to tease me about that, considering how many hours you put in wearing a top hat and touring special drain locations.” She pauses and gives him her best stern face, “so you got arrested for finding a body?”

“So, you’re back to that,” he runs his hand through his hair, “and I wasn’t teasing you, for the record, I’m honestly really impressed and I’d like to see the original picture at some point, if that’s ok—”

“Maybe, if you’re not in jail for murder since you got arrested for being found with a murder victim.”

“Is that a promise?” He hits a crosswalk button a few extra times. “You’ll let me come see it if I stay out jail for murder?”

“That’s a pretty low bar, but sure, tell me how you plan to accomplish that.”

“The number one thing I have going for me is that I definitely didn’t kill anyone.” He numbers on his hand, “but the number one thing going against me is that the detective on the case happens to be the very same guy that Snotlout has been antagonizing for months, and he didn’t seem to like me very much.”

“That’s worse than being found with the body? I would have thought that would be the number one thing against you.”

“You have met Snotlout, right?” He laughs, leading her to the right and down a street she hasn’t explored yet. It’s not an alley though, thankfully. As safe as she felt last night she can’t say that a recent murder really makes her want to dive back into Berk’s architectural underbelly.

“Barely,” Astrid thinks back to his surprisingly reasonable texts, “and honestly, from my first impression, he’s one of the least crazy people I’ve met since moving back here.”

“I give a daily tour about one serial killer and suddenly it’s ok to call me crazy. Ok, I get it.”

A man steps out of an alley ahead of them, adjusting a dirty backpack over his shoulder and zipping the outermost layer of muddy raincoats he’s wearing. Hiccup doesn’t seem to notice or care, but Astrid pauses, looking back at the nearest crosswalk and debating turning around.

“What’s up?” Hiccup stops a few paces ahead when he realizes she isn’t next to him.

“Nothing, I just…I’m fine,” she brushes off the cold feeling in the pit of her stomach.
“Hey Dave!” Hiccup calls out when they get a little further along and the man stops and waves.

“Hiccup, what’s up?”

“I just wanted to let you know that I have umm, a hunch that there might be a bit of increased police activity in the alleys,” he winces as he says it, avoiding ‘murder’ like ‘fire’ in a crowded theater.

“Your cousin tell you that?”

“Something like that.”

“Like I don’t have enough to do avoiding those watch force assholes,” the man shakes his head, “thanks for the heads up.”

“No problem, how’s the leg holding up?”

“Way better than what I had before,” he pulls up his pantleg to reveal a metallic shaft where his lower leg should be, “thanks again, man. He’s a really generous guy,” the man winks at Astrid and she flushes.

“Oh, sorry, I’m being rude. This is Astrid, we umm—she went on some of my tours.” He luckily settles on an explanation that doesn’t falsely proclaim her interest in Viggo Grimborn.

“Nice to meet you,” Astrid nods and Hiccup chats about the weather for another moment before telling Dave he has no cash and continuing their walk back to her apartment. “So, is he a…friend of yours?”

“Not really,” Hiccup shrugs and pauses to pull up his own right pant leg, stunning her with another metal rod. “He’s a couple inches shorter than me and my mid-pubescent leg was a decent fit for him, and it’s not like I was using it.”

“Oh,” Astrid stumbles over her words, “I guess you didn’t reveal your whole tragic past.”

“That’s not tragic,” he brushes his pant cuff back down, “how uncomfortable you were with Dave kind of was, what was up with that?”

“I wasn’t uncomfortable,” she moves closer to the edge of the sidewalk, ignoring curious eyes on the side of her face, “I’m just not used to…people choosing to live in alleys.”

“You can say homeless people,” he scoffs, “it’s not a bad word, but I wouldn’t call it a choice either.”

“I mean, instead of worrying about avoiding some watch force, he could get a job.” Astrid only hears an echo of her dad’s reasonable worldview until Hiccup laughs, unoffended in a way that makes her feel instantly naïve.

“I am not the favored audience of the old ‘get a job’ speech.” He takes another right and she sees the back of her apartment building at the next corner.

“Did you take the scenic route back to my building?” She stops short and crosses her arms, willing herself not to blush when he does.

“We had a lot to get through,” he shrugs, and she should be irritated but she’s not. Ok, maybe she’s a little irritated that he keeps leading her through convoluted mazes without telling her first, but this
one in particular is...endearing. He wanted more time with her but didn’t know how to ask.

“I don’t think we did a very good job,” she glances at his leg, “there’s a lot unanswered.”

“Absolutely,” his smile is more cautious than she’d like it to be, “maybe two or three more of these little walks and I’ll actually give you a chance to talk.”

“Oh, you know how to let other people talk? I wouldn’t have guessed that,” she deadpans as they cross the alley behind her building, hoping that her key is going to work in the back door.

“Guess I’ve got to say out of jail then to prove it,” he grins and she’s glad that the door opens when it does, because the lack of sleep is really catching up to her now, making her think she should keep talking to him. That doesn’t make sense at all, especially with him respecting the threshold to her building like he should respect alley gates.

“I hope you’ve got your own reasons for that.”

He shrugs and she’s worried about him again, because he apparently he exists on a constant precipice of doing something really stupid. What she doesn’t understand is why she’s so sure he shouldn’t be allowed to do it alone.

The knock on her door a few minutes later doesn’t surprise her. Astrid assumes it’s just Hiccup following up on coming by the archives or bringing her another awful book. She opens it ready to tell him that, no, walking her home after the slowest, most drawn out explanation of stumbling upon a murder scene does not count as a date, but instead of Hiccup’s nervous face, she sees a badge.

“Oh,” she steps back, taking in the man in an official looking black suit with a narrow tie, tattoo on his chin entirely out of place on his reserved, professional expression.

“Are you Astrid Hofferson?” He asks in a firm, British voice and she nods dumbly, “I’m Detective Eretson with the Berk PD investigating a recent murder case, do you have a minute?”

“Sure,” she waves him inside, glad that Ruffnut isn’t here. Something tells her Detective Eretson would be less understanding of assertions that he takes off his clothes for money than Snotlout apparently was.

“This should be quick, ma’am—”

“Ma’am?” For some reason, that’s funny, forcing a laugh out of her even as anxiety bubbles up in her chest. She’s read too many bungled case reports to trust dealing with cops, and she didn’t enjoy it to begin with.

“Miss,” he clears his throat, suit jacket tight across rigid shoulders. “My apologies—”

“What do you think I have to do with a murder investigation?” She doesn’t know whether she should offer him a seat or take it herself. That and she’s kicking herself over not asking Hiccup whether he told Snotlout about what they’d heard or not. All that Grimborn research was enough practice in keeping a story straight without real life application following it up.

“Do you know Hiccup Haddock?”

“Know might be an overstatement, I know of him.” It’s not a lie, she didn’t know until today that he’s apparently missing a leg. She knows his favorite Grimborn theory, sure, but in what world does that equate to knowing someone?
“Where were you last night?”

“Home, why?” She crosses her arms, leaning back on her heels.

“This morning we received a copy of some closed-circuit security footage from a nearby development,” he pulls a video up on his phone and plays it. The time in the corner reads 4:12am and the grainy black and white footage shows two people in an alley, standing facing each other.

They jump simultaneously at 4:13, the taller person tucking the shorter into his chest, arms protectively around her shoulders.

“If you were at home last night, this isn’t you in this footage, is that correct, miss?”

“You asked where I was last night, not where I was very early this morning,” Astrid uses Hiccup’s line of reasoning and it feels hollow and stupid.

“So, this is you with Hiccup Haddock?”

“Yes,” she admits, “how did you get my name from that grainy video?”

“This morning while in custody, Mr. Haddock claimed that he came across the victim’s body when he was on his way from this address to his house, if this is you in this video, that places him nearly two blocks away at the approximate time of the murder.”

“That doesn’t explain how you got my name, this building has other units in it.” The video is playing on repeat on Eretson’s phone and Astrid keeps glancing back at it, seeing herself step into Hiccup’s arms again and again.

“This is the only unit with a woman’s name on the lease.”

“That would narrow it down.” She watches the video loop one last time and it hits her. The video has no audio, so there’s no way to tell that the scream made them move.

It looks like a date. An awkward date she now suspects is technically trespassing, given the security footage, but it doesn’t tie them to the occurrence of the murder. The lack of recorded scream makes sure they’re only tied to a location adjacent to but not on top of where the murder was occurring.

A minute ago, she wasn’t sure if she was willing to keep a story straight for Hiccup and now, whatever she says next will either confirm an alibi or make him look guilty. What’s even worse is that she could look guilty too, just by proximity, as she’s seen happen so many times.

“Hiccup was giving me a private tour of…the city, I just moved here.” She raises an eyebrow, “but I bet you saw that on the lease.”

“What happened after this footage was taken?” He says ‘footage’ like he feels awkward asking her about a hug, and she’s thankful for that.

“He walked me home and then headed home himself soon after.”

“Alright,” Eretson makes a note in a small notebook and tucks it back in his jacket’s internal pocket, along with his badge. “Thank you for your time, Miss Hofferson.” He hands her a business card, Detective E. Eretson inscribed on the top edge of it in shiny, official blue ink. “If you remember anything else, feel free to let me know, I’ll be in touch if I need anything else from you.”
“Ok,” she opens the front door for him and he nods at her on the way out. “Wait,” she follows him into the hallway, stopping short when he turns around.

“Is there something else?”

“For—were we trespassing? In that video?”

“The development can’t technically press charges, their contracted security force put up cameras watching the borders of their properties without notifying the police.”

“That’s a fancy way of saying yes, but you’re getting away with it, isn’t it?” She crosses her arms and something that could almost be called a smile tugs at the corner of Eretson’s mouth.

“Yes, it is.”

“Ok, well…thanks.”

“Let me know if you think of anything else,” he takes a step backwards and then pauses, “oh, and just be aware, the police should be fully aware of all development border monitoring cameras by the end of the week.”

“I’ll pass that along.”
Chapter 8

It takes a week to re-open the alley behind the Ripped Tavern. Hiccup technically could have gone back to an old tour route that starts out front and goes by Astrid’s apartment as its first stop, but he likes the other script better and if he went in that order, he’s not sure how he’d end it. He saw Heather a few times, the feather in her hat visible above the larger than normal crowd collected around her just outside the caution tape at the mouth of the alley. So much for losing a few tours in the face of an actual murder.

He had time, if not money, to actually dry clean his hat and coat though and thanks to Snotlout’s unusual generosity, he picks them up the day before he’s set to restart his own tours. He hasn’t heard anything from Detective Eretson aside from a single phone call asking for Gobber’s information and he feels reasonably safe avoiding suspicion on his old route. If anything it’d be more suspicious to stop at this point, probably.

“Is the goat smell dead?” Snotlout greets when he gets home, taking the plastic wrapped coat from him and pressing his nose up against the collar.

“Have you considered that my coat smelled because it was next to your uniform coat after you took the petting zoo call?”

“No, and I won’t.” He hands it back, “it smells fine now, by the way.”

“And they got the toothpaste out of my hat,” Hiccup demonstrates, gesturing at the clean black felt like it’s the reward on a niche game show.

“It looks…no, it looks dorkier now.”

“I’ll admit the stain had a certain charm,” he hangs it on the hat rack by the door and sits down in his dad’s chair.

A certain charm bestowed upon it by Astrid when she flung her toothbrush at him and started something. Or maybe he started something when he shined a laser pointer through her window, those are semantics, but something feels started. He was addled from the long night when he walked her home from the tavern and he thinks he hid it well, but that means the details came back to him slowly over the next few days.

The suspicious way she looked at him when he avoided telling her the whole story all at once. The way she took his hand when she saw he was upset. The look she gave Heather when they were interrupted. Her expression when he showed her his leg, no scrap of pity hidden in the bright curious spark in her eyes, like she was almost glad to have something else to get to investigate.

She keeps him focused in a way he’s never liked until now.

“I’m sure Astrid will whack you with another toothbrush,” Snotlout cuts off his train of thought with a disparaging sigh, “your eyes are glazing over, dude, just text her. I swear, if you haven’t scared her off with your weirdness by now I don’t think it’s possible.”

“Yeah, she doesn’t scare easy,” he shakes his head. The only time he’s seen her scared was when they happened to overhear someone’s last scream, a memory that still sends a sick chill down Hiccup’s spine, and it’s made worse by Snotlout’s easy teasing. He and Snotlout don’t really have secrets, especially legally implicating secrets, but if Hiccup brought it up now it would be obvious that he’s been hiding it, which he has.
He knows Snotlout is stupid and stubborn enough to protect him no matter what, and it’s better for both of them if he looks as innocent as possible.

“So just text her,” Snotlout shrugs, “send her a Venice Gelato fact or something.”

“I know you know his name is Viggo Grimborn.”

“I thought no one knew what his name was because no one ever figured the murders out,” he throws a pen cap at Hiccup’s face and it bounces off his forehead, “see? I pay attention.”

“For the record, I have been texting her.” Hiccup scrolls through his phone, “she told me that the cops talked to her and warned her about some cameras and I said thank you.”

“That doesn’t count.”

“Sure it does, it means she’s glad I’m not in jail and she’s telling me what to avoid to keep it that way.” He hasn’t told Snotlout that he’s waiting for an invitation to the archives for an entirely different reason, namely, the amount of mocking he’d have to endure for being excited about being invited to a room full of musty old newspapers. It’s the kind of thing to mention after it goes well, especially ever since the first few failed dates he got from tours became Snotlout’s favorite ‘embarrass Hiccup’ stories. “Fine, I’ll text her.”

Hiccup (6:02pm): hey
Astrid (6:05pm): still not in jail, I see

That’s a kind of a start. Hiccup can work with that, maybe. He turns sideways in his dad’s chair, legs over the arm of it to better ignore Snotlout crunching his cereal while watching the evening news.

Hiccup (6:06pm): living in constant fear but when have I ever let that stop me from living my life lol
Astrid (6:06pm): shit, what did you hear? Are you in trouble?
Astrid (6:07pm): I was there

Hiccup (6:08pm): are you offering to be my alibi?

He regrets it as soon as he sends it because alibi sounds like a term of endearment.

Hiccup (6:08pm): not that I need one since I’m not guilty as you know
Astrid (6:09pm): doesn’t the ‘as you know’ kind of automatically make me your alibi?
Hiccup (6:10pm): eh
Hiccup (6:10pm): only if you want it to, I could ask Viggo
Astrid (6:11pm): so there are no developments in the case?
Hiccup (6:11pm): not that I’m aware of
Astrid (6:13pm): maybe they just aren’t telling you
Astrid (6:13pm): which is good news

Hiccup glances at Snotlout, who’s wiping cereal milk off of his chin with his sleeve, before answering.
Hiccup (6:14pm): I haven’t heard anything about me going to jail

Astrid (6:15pm): I’m off work at 5 tomorrow but I could stay late and show you the Al, I, picture

She punctuates her interpretation of the message precisely and Hiccup smiles to himself. He does love that she has a theory, he loves that she isn’t listening to what anyone says and instead is finding her own conclusion, most of all because that conclusion seems to include him.

Her theory is wrong, for the record, because the four main Grimborn murders line up very precisely, but there’s no reason to fight her argument, especially the way her eyes light up when she’s making it.

Hiccup (6:15pm): sure, sounds good

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Hiccup hasn’t really been to the archives since Snotlout got his full access at the police station. It’s not that he felt he’d gotten through everything that the archives had to offer, it was more a combination of the fact that he and Heather weren’t really talking anymore and the fact that the police station had so many things he’d never seen. When he shows up a little after five though and the blonde guy at the front desk gives him a look overflowing with withering recognition, he remembers the other reason he prefers researching elsewhere.

At the police station, he’s always the only person in the file room. At the archives though, it’s the view of the establishment that he is the wrong kind of obsessive academic.

“Hi, I’m looking for Astrid,” he pauses at the desk to shake the drizzle off of his hat and adjust his bag over his shoulder.

“She told me,” the guy nods curtly and goes back to the blueprint on his desk. It looks like some kind of manufacturing facility, the machinery drawn out carefully with painstakingly thin lines of black ink.

“Is that the warehouse that used to be over on fifth?”

“It has nothing to do with Viggo Grimborn,” he doesn’t need to look up with his tone making his opinion so obvious.

“I know that,” Hiccup shoves the hand not holding his hat in his pocket, “it was just a pretty building.”

“It was a sweatshop.”

“And the strip mall they put in to replace it isn’t?” He laughs, “there’s like two Starbucks in it and a seasonal Halloween store.”

“Sorry, Fishlegs,” Astrid rushes out of the back, stopping at the second desk to check something off of a to do list, undone hair falling over her shoulder. It’s longer than Hiccup thought it was, longer and obviously in the way in a way that suits her. Of course, she’d be constantly engaging in a battle with something growing out of her head. “I know I said I wouldn’t make you talk Grimborn.”

“It gets us all eventually,” Fishlegs looks up at her, irritated like a fond older brother roped into playing tea party. He turns to Hiccup then, eyes drifting from his coat to his hat, lip curling slightly under his respectably waxed moustache. “But just because I feel like I have to say it, you
do know that we have all kinds of historical information. Not just information pertaining to six months in the early eighteen eighties, right?"

“Of course I do, you have all the information on the nineteen fifty-two Grimborn copycat killer, right?” Hiccup grins, placing his hat back on his head, “I’ll be sure to have a look at that.”

“I remember you,” Fishlegs narrows his eyes, “you’re the guy who broke the photocopier trying to shove a comic book in it.”

“That was three years ago,” he laughs, “and I fixed it. Which is really ridiculous, because Berk University is still a public institution the last time I checked, so really my tax payer dollars should have fixed it.”

“You don’t pay taxes,” Astrid rolls her eyes, efficiently grabbing Hiccup’s elbow and pulling him towards an aisle made of industrial bookshelves lined two thick with old, yellowed newspapers.

“And he doesn’t even pay taxes,” Fishlegs mutters under his breath before the density of the historic walls blots him out.

“You know, even if I work tax free, I still pay taxes,” Hiccup says, wishing his messenger bag were on the other side instead of bumping into her hip every couple steps and risking alerting her to the fact that she’s still holding onto his elbow. “Property tax. Sales tax, I do buy things, when I have money.”

“I didn’t realize online sellers properly taxed Grimborn paraphernalia,” she snorts, letting go if his arm when she turns a corner into a smaller aisle, this one interrupted by a low wooden table, covered in a few spread out papers. The table is pushed up against a shelf full of stacked volumes of almanacs and encyclopedias from the early eighteen hundreds, as well as manila folders full of carefully catalogued scraps of paper.

“They don’t, but I eat. Occasionally.”

“Do you?” She teases, elbowing him in the side as she flips through a Berk Enquirer with careful fingers.

“Again, when I have money.” He sets his bag down and looks over her shoulder, stepping a little too close when he notices a picture of Bog street that he hasn’t seen before. She smells like old book dust and something floral and he clears his throat.

“Sorry, I should have just left it on the picture, I got the paper out last minute.”

“No, it’s fine, I love skimming stories about…” it takes a minute to focus on any thing on the page with her so close and he steps to the side and leans against the table instead, “the alien connection to Berk’s city planning. That’s some hard-hitting journalism right there.”

“You know, almost everything I’ve found has been in the Enquirer,” she pauses, pointing out a bible sales ad in the corner and raising an eyebrow. “And considering you’re here to see what I found, despite your obvious blood feud with Fishlegs, maybe you shouldn’t disrespect it.”

“Blood feud?”

“I’ve never seen him be that rude to anyone, you knew his blueprint and he still lectured you.” She laughs and turns one more page, nodding to herself, “here we go. One Police Constable Brown was kind enough to donate his daily paper, and on this day he made a note of the time when he checked out the courtyard at 324 Harbor Road.”
Hiccup freezes, eyes widening as he takes in the small, grainy picture. He remembers the way he felt on his first Grimborn tour, standing outside that apartment building and feeling connected to the city for the first time since his dad died. Like he was somewhere that had lived through tragedy before, somewhere that had recovered.

Astrid steps back to give him space and he picks up the paper, holding it from either side like a police officer did a hundred years ago. Like his dad used to hold the paper at breakfast, except his dad wasn’t usually reading an article insinuating that a dragon was the cause of the barn fire the week before.

“I can’t believe this exists.”

“What? The punctuation?” She’s smiling when he tears his eyes away from the paper, not smug so much as rightfully triumphant. “Because it definitely does.”

“How did you—I never would have thought to check the Enquirer.” He shakes his head at the picture, mouthing the caption and sighing. “Everything surrounding this picture is crap, but it’s… genuine.”

“I would have thought it’d have your name all over it then,” she says too quiet, like she thinks she can keep it a secret from the books around them, absorbing and storing everything over centuries.

“What?”

“You know, Admiral Haddock,” she tucks her hair behind her ear, either embarrassed or annoyed to have to explain herself. Maybe both. “It’s complete bullshit, but it’s your favorite theory.”

“Well, yeah, how could it not be?” He doesn’t think anyone else could tear his eyes away from this paper right now, but Astrid is inexplicably blushing as she tucks her hair behind her ear. “Do you have one yet?”

“I don’t share a name with an implausible famous serial killer suspect, no.”

“No, do you have a favorite theory yet?” He can’t put the paper down but he can’t look away from Astrid either. He’s stuck holding onto a scrap of history he wouldn’t have without her, but it feels more like a springboard to somewhere else.

“Like do I have an opinion about who Viggo Grimborn is?” She cocks her head, arms crossed, stance so rigid it’s active. Alive. Pulsing with things she might tell him if he just shuts up for a second.

He shrugs. She bites her lip and exhales.

“No, I mean, none of them are a favorite. All of them are full of holes,” she flips through a notebook that’s also on the table, neat handwriting flying past, “it’s never going to be answered.”

“I know that, but I don’t know, you worked so hard—“

“The Enquirer,” she cuts him off, but she’s smart enough to not take the paper from his hands, instead picking up another issue on the table and showing a larger bible ad, dated before the second murder, and Hiccup’s chest burns. “It’s been completely ignored because it was a little weird or loud or ridiculous—“

“I know the feeling,” Hiccup watches her because he doesn’t have or want a choice.
“It’s full of witness accounts,” she finds a page and her face lights up, determined and absolutely ready to fight with him, “like here, Reginald Smith of 32 Downer Lane saw lights on the rooftops on the night of Catherine Whittaker’s murder, but it’s reported as an alien appearance—“

“But he said it was an alien spacecraft,” Hiccup hates himself for interrupting but Astrid’s expression only gets more rigid. More stern.

She doesn’t want his validation she wants to convince him, to present the facts that make him come around to her idea all on his own.

“Yes, but it was the late eighteen hundreds, he was poor and drunk and uneducated. He saw something he couldn’t understand and read the cheaper newspaper and extrapolated with what he could. By cutting out the sources that don’t make the best soundbites, the entire case was... bungled. Honestly, if the detectives had talked to anyone other than respectable witnesses, maybe you wouldn’t be so obsessed with it today.“

“If you’re going to educate me like this, I think you need the hat,” he laughs, because he doesn’t know what else to do. He’s never been so scared he’d damage an artifact as his hands start shaking and a bead of sweat blooms on his brow.

“Maybe I do,” she sets her own newspaper down and takes his hat, setting it on her head. It’s too big, again, falling slightly crooked to the right, but that doesn’t change how bright the black wool makes her eyes look. “The investigation was completely swayed by the same class distinction as the crimes, if you dig through the Enquirer for what? An hour? Ten minutes? You’ll find multiple reports of people seeing lights on rooftops or mythical creatures in the woods that almost perfectly align with some drunk idea of already named suspects. Are you saying you’ve never read a description of Drago Bludvist and thought sasquatch?” She laughs, shrill and convincing, her face on fire. “Because I have a description somewhere here...”

She starts to flick through the spare few papers she has laid out on the table, her tongue barely peeking out of the corner of her mouth, and Hiccup doesn’t know he’s moving until he is. He doesn’t decide to let go of one side of the paper he’s holding, he doesn’t decide to touch her jaw, his fingers curling gently around her chin as she freezes, eyes wide.

He does choose to kiss her though, the brim of his own top hat against his forehead.

She exhales softly, a shaky hand landing against his arm as she responds, as slowly and enthusiastically as she does to everything. Her lips move like she hasn’t forgot her determination and Hiccup slides out, his hand to her waist and pulls her close, the crinkle of newspaper filling the silent hallway.

“Wait,” she pushes him away, gentle like she’s scared of offending him even though she’s obviously already offended, “the paper—“

“Sorry.”

“No, it’s old, this is a hundred years old,” she pulls back far enough to set the paper he’s been holding in a single clenched fist into a careful layer.

Then she smooths over it with a gentle palm, biting her lower, slightly swollen lip. It’s careful document care, her hands worrying the paper with quick, sure motions. His tophat falls down over her forehead and she adjusts it, the brim of it setting heavy on her ear and making it stick out further. He doesn’t think his heart has ever pounded this hard in his life.
She stands up and her wide eyes dart to his lips. He surges forward before he can think twice, one hand on her waist and the other on the back of her head as he pushes her against the bookcase, his lips meeting hers somewhere along the way. He swallows her grunt that verges on a moan, fingers curling in her sweatshirt as her arms wrap around his neck. She holds him close, like she’s scared he’ll try and get away and he kisses her like he can convey that’s the last thing on his mind.

She’s warm and soft, all long lean lines arching against him as he slides his hand to her hip, her cold fingers tangling in the hair at the nape of his neck. There’s a thud, but he can’t tell if it’s his heart or something else and he ignores it, kissing along her jaw and trying to remember how to breathe. She grabs his chin and pulls his mouth back to hers.

Another thud.

Breathing isn’t important anyway, why was he so hung up on it in the first place?

She hooks her heel behind his knee and he loses balance slightly, catching himself on the metal edge of the bookshelf. The clang can’t compete with Astrid’s hand fisted in the front of his coat though and his hand dips under her sweatshirt to feel the smooth skin of her lower back.

“Come on, guys!” Someone yells and Astrid pulls back with a surprised gasp, tophat deeply crooked, lips swollen and chin red from stubble.

“Shit, sorry Fishlegs,” she pushes him off, gently, tugging her sweatshirt down and wiping her mouth on the back of her hand. Fishlegs is at the end of the aisle with his arms crossed, tapping his foot like a dad two minutes after curfew and Hiccup can’t hold in the laugh that bubbles in his chest.

“Yeah, sorry Fishlegs.”

“You took out half the Britannicas,” he nods at the dozen or so encyclopedias on the floor, explaining the thuds.

“I’ll clean it up, sorry,” Astrid tries to fix her hair but blushes impossibly deeper when she brushes the brim of the hat still on her head.

“It was a pristine collection—”

“I said I’ll fix it.”

“If any corners are blunted—”

“Fishlegs!” She snaps, glancing at Hiccup out of the corner of her eye, “can you give us a second? Please?” The last word is gritted through her teeth, politely threatening.

“This is what I get for helping with Grimborn research,” he grumbles under his breath as he walks away, “it took me years to get that eighteen eighty seven and it ends up on the floor…”

“So, umm—” Hiccup starts but Astrid doesn’t seem to be listening, instead picking up books and dedicatedly checking their corners.

“Help me get these onto the table at least, I’m going to be here an hour cleaning this up.”

“Sure,” he picks up too and looks over at her, that adorable tongue sticking out again as she squints at a publication page and smooths it carefully in a way that makes his heart rate tick up again. “Are they ok?”
“Yeah, they’re fine, Fishlegs is just being, well, Fishlegs.” She sets the book down and pauses, looking at him carefully, cheeks still stained bright red, “so, umm, what are you doing after this?”

“What am I doing after this?” The question doesn’t quite register. It’s not a question she should be asking him after he came to her job and insulted her research and made her wear a stupid, but somehow-incredibly-attractive-on-her hat before attacking her against a bookcase. He swallows hard.

“In case you wanted to talk about…you know,” she waves at the bookcase and bites her lip, as hesitantly open as she was definitively closed on the first tour she took with him.

Fuck. His tour.

“I have a tour,” he checks the time, “I have a tour in…about as much time as it takes to get there if I run, I’ve got to go.”

“Right, your tour, sorry—”

“No, no, no. Don’t apologize,” he runs a frantic hand through his hair, “and I really hate to do this. Like, I don’t think you understand how much I hate to do this, but…I need this back.” He plucks his hat carefully off of her head. “I’ve got to go, I—”

“Go, I’ll talk to you later,” she waves him off, making a vain effort to fix her staticky hair. A lock of her bangs is sticking out to the side and he wants to smooth it down but if he touched her right now, he wouldn’t stop.

And that’s bad because he’d miss his tour. And he’s out of money. Even if Astrid is looking at him, he still has to care about money, right?

“Ok, yeah, later.”

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It’s really hard to give a tour when every other word in his head is ‘Astrid’. Viggo Astrid Grimborn Astrid was Astrid a really Astrid bad Astrid guy. It’s harder to give a tour when questions stall him for twenty minutes at the fourth murder site, questions he doesn’t want to answer. Questions about a recent murder that he doesn’t want to think about.

“I heard from the bartender inside that the body was positioned exactly like Mary Johnson,” a man with coke bottle glasses that make him look a little too fascinated with everything asks eagerly, staring at the storm drain and reminding Hiccup what he saw. “Down to the placement of the intestines—”

“I don’t know anything about that,” he lies, “it’s an ongoing murder case, I’m here to do a tour about Viggo Grimborn if anyone wants to listen to that.”

“But surely you must be interested in the resemblance—”

“I’m not. Or even if I was, it’s an ongoing murder case, I’m not going to stand here in an alley I tour nightly and talk about it.” He starts walking and hopes the larger than usual group will follow. They did already pay, but that’s not why he does this, why he wants to do it. The copy of the ‘All Safe’ message in his bag burns to be shown around and his brain flicks back to Astrid, Astrid, Astrid. Astrid. “I’ve got reasons to stay out of custody for looking accidentally guilty.”

“I heard they arrested someone when they found the body,” someone murmurs and glasses speaks
“Do you know anything about that?”

“No, I don’t. I know about Victorian slums and Viggo Grimborn and the fact that the local reverend believed that decreasing the cost of bibles would infuse the community with renewed Christianity and righteousness and that would fix the prostitution problem,” he gestures at the church as they walk past, “instead of, you know, feeding people.”

“I just don’t think you understand the statistical improbability of identical intestine placement of two disemboweled corpses found at the exact same spot over a hundred years apart—”

“I also took high school statistics,” Hiccup sighs, pausing to face the group, “and like half a college statistics course, but that’s not—let’s get one thing straight. The women who died a hundred years ago and the woman who died last week aren’t corpses, or they are, but—they were people with feelings and lives and yes, the circumstances of their death is morbidly fascinating, but does that mean we ignore the circumstances of their life?”

It’s silent for a second and someone in the back raises their hand.

“Youh, go ahead, despite the lecture this isn’t a class.”

“Do you think it’s a copycat killer?” They ask and Hiccup sighs heavily.

“Onto site one.”
“Hey,” Astrid grabs her coat without stopping at her desk, trying and failing not to notice the unread e-mails she should really deal with, “everything’s clean back there, I’m going to head out. See you tomorrow.”

“Astrid,” Fishlegs looks up from his blueprint, hands folded together like a guidance counselor determined to guide.

“No damage, I checked them all over, which no one has done in a while apparently, because the eighteen ninety-two edition was mixed with the ninety-five edition to spell some very interesting words.” She slings her coat over her arm and steps towards the door. “So tomorrow, I’m closing, right? That’s what I thought, goodnight!”

“You know, you don’t need to pretend to be interested in Grimborn-ology to impress some guy.”

“Thanks for the pep talk, Dad.” She crosses her arms, wondering when Fishlegs got to know her well enough to know she can’t walk away from someone saying something so blatantly incorrect. “It’s not like that.”

“He’s only after one thing—“

“I’m a bona-fide grown up, Fish, I think I can handle when I give that out.” Her cheeks heat up anyway and she wishes she were built to run for it. “Not that it’s any of your business.”

“No, that’s not—he’s just here to build his collection, you don’t need to pretend to be part of it.”

“You’re lecturing me because you think Hiccup is using me for Grimborn facts?” She laughs, “I think he finds those fine on his own.” It’s the thing she’s dwelling on now. He doesn’t want to have information spoon fed to him, he wants to find it. More than that, he wants to share it. It was obvious on the part of a tour she went on, as much as she didn’t want to admit that there was anything positive about him at all.

And most of all, he wants it shared with him. He wants her to share it with him.

“I’ve seen a lot of those self proclaimed soft scientists come through here—“

“Yeah, and he’s very well adjusted.” She remembers his story from their midnight tour, his easy laugh as he talked about escaping things that should have shaken him. It reminds her of his leg, another story she hasn’t gotten out of him yet, and part of her worries she never will now.

What if he is just after one thing that isn’t Grimborn facts? What if the conversation is gone now since they kissed like that?

“Are you?” Fishlegs raises a concerned eyebrow and she doesn’t remember the last time she’s had so many people ready to worry about her. She can’t say she likes it, but it does feel sort of warm, companionable.

“Not remotely,” she sighs, “what happened? You were so excited when you heard he asked me on a private tour.”

“Yeah, I thought that meant a date, one of us should be doing that.” He snorts, “and by that, I mean signing out a private study room, which we have two of, by the way. You don’t need to damage the
“They’re fine, Fish, I checked them—“

“I’m just saying that you should be careful.” He holds his hands up in a surrender that feels like Astrid’s loss. “And did you check the bindings? I hate bent bindings, I still have time to put a shaper in for the night.”

“The bindings are fine. I’m leaving now,” she puts on her jacket, “and I appreciate the umm…tip, about the study rooms or—that won’t happen again. I’m really glad to have this job, I’m not someone who does…that at work—“

“If you were I wouldn’t have hired you,” he nods, “or contributed my positive opinion during the hiring process, because I’m not technically your boss and you weren’t on the clock anyway.”

“Ok,” she nods, “sounds good.”

Mercifully, the lecture is over and she can get back to dwelling on that kiss.

It shouldn’t have happened. Not because she didn’t want it to, she hasn’t gotten that far, but there was no reason for it. She didn’t want start talking like that, not when she’d already shown him what he wanted. She’d waffled for an hour about leaving her other research out, that’s why it was back in the encyclopedias. No one except Fishlegs visits more than tri-annually, it was safe, and she could have chosen to avoid it.

She could have grabbed the one pertinent thing and talked in the hallway, but she decided against it when she heard him talking to Fishlegs. Trying, even though he didn’t have to. He was curious, even when he was shut out. Earnest.

When she put that last paper on the table she wasn’t hoping for the best, but she was anticipating the worst. She waited for him to tell her that she’d done too much or that she was gloating, and the last thing she expected was him to get excited about it. Not that he had to get excited about the subject matter, because he’s always excited about Viggo Grimborn.

But he got excited about her.

Her chin still tingles when she thinks about the way he touched her. Gentle, appraising, but not like she was fragile. More like she was something to be preserved, like the paper between them. Like her importance was in the interpretation.

She usually doesn’t take the train home, but today she’s tired enough to care about getting there ten minutes earlier. It was a long day at work before Hiccup showed up, not that she remembers what she did or why or anything other than the way that he didn’t mind her pausing a kiss to deal with a paper. If anything, he liked it, and she doesn’t know how to feel about that.

It’s late enough that she should have missed Hiccup’s first tour, a fact she had very mixed feelings about the whole way home, but he’s still at the wall by her apartment when she gets there, waving around the “Al, I. Safe” picture she gave him.

“But really people? I am potentially the only one to have what is probably the only documented proof of one of the most hotly debated pieces of Grimborn evidence in the history of the case, but you’re still asking me about a week-old murder?” He shoves the picture back into his bag, and Astrid can’t even fault him for not noticing her, given the unusually large size of his tour group and the fact he’s more frazzled than she’s ever seen him.
And that’s really saying something given she revealed she was the one to damage his beloved hat by threatening a harassment claim against him.

“The nineteen fifty-two copycat killer led to new discoveries in the Grimborn case,” a man with thick glasses at the front of the group insists and Hiccup’s jaw flexes, his nostrils flaring before he answers.

“Retroactively applying modern forensic techniques to the Grimborn case is always a dead end, given the fact that most evidence has either been destroyed, lost, or sold. The DNA findings on that letter was a stroke of impossible luck at best and it wasn’t even definitive, all that it showed was that the killer was likely a male of Scandinavian descent. This is Berk, should we start interviewing at Anderson?” He laughs, more nasal in his frustration. “If we could get on with site two before Grimborn becomes a two-hundred-year-old cold case, that’d be great, we’re running late enough as is.”

“I’m just trying to impress the importance of this opportunity onto you,” Glasses lectures like he’s about to take over the tour and Astrid hopes she sounded better than that when she did the same thing, “if someone is copying Grimborn’s methods, by studying it with modern forensic methods, maybe we could work backwards and—”

“Yes, we can just dig up security camera footage from the late eighteen hundreds, I’m sure that’s a thing that exists. Why don’t you tell me?” Hiccup gestures for the guy to respond, scratching under his hat and leaving it crooked.

As much as Astrid likes frazzling him, she doesn’t like watching other people do it. It’s her job to make him look stupid on tours, and the ownership feels as unnaturally familiar as kissing him did.

“When are we going to site two?” She walks around the crowd to the front and Hiccup zeroes in on her, confused but happy to see her, “I’ve heard it’s inaccessible now.”

Hiccup’s eyes light up with the actual question and he nods, waving to the group and walking backwards, tripping on a seam in the sidewalk.

“Excellent question from the delightfully focused lady in the front,” he points out the nearest alley, “back in the late eighteen hundreds, a first attempt at fire code zoned Downtown Berk for a three foot gap between all buildings over three stories. It didn’t work, because everything was heated by coal and when people couldn’t afford coal they burned what they could find, and also, no one ever informed fire that it’s not supposed to jump more than three feet. But it left whoever Viggo Grimborn was with a network of alleys full of hiding places and escape routes.”

“We started our tour in an alley, so they can’t all be closed off,” a woman excitedly grabs her friend’s arm, “maybe the killer from last week is still hiding in one, what do you think?”

Hiccup’s shoulders visibly tighten and Astrid can’t help but remember the morning after he saw what he saw, the tight friendly set of him, like he was trying so hard to look like he was alright he hadn’t parsed through whether he was or not. She’s never seen him look fake on a tour before, usually he thrives on the audience, but right now he’s so tense he’s not even talking with his hands.

“Tell us about Catherine Whittaker,” she prods. “Was she a prostitute too? Why were they all prostitutes?”

“More excellent questions, milady,” he stops outside the gate they climbed over the other night, leaning easily on the slightly cleaner patch where the ‘no trespassing’ sign must have hung. “You see, now, in modern times, all it takes to get a girl alone in a dark alley is some charm and literally
“the least dangerous appearance known to man,” he gestures at himself and winks at her, both communicating appreciation and feeding on her instant blush to find his groove again, “but, back when murder wasn’t so frowned upon by the establishment, it took more than noodle arms,” he flexes and pats his arm, “to get a decent lady somewhere private. So, Grimborn, whoever he was, found that the easiest women to get alone were those who would follow willingly for money, and it had the added bonus that they usually lacked respectable families to get up in arms and fund extra investigations.”

“Maybe the murderer paid the woman off to follow him!” A man in the middle of the crowd offers, “she was homeless, right?”

“Who? Catherine Whittaker?” Astrid glares at where the voice came from, “because I’m here to hear about Catherine Whittaker, the Grimborn victim.”

The glare works, because the crowd stays mostly silent through Hiccup’s explanation of the second murder. He’s a little frantic, still, remembering to move his arms only occasionally and accidentally smacking the gate twice. Astrid remembers trusting him as she climbed over it, and here, on the tour, she feels stupid about it all over again.

A hundred years ago, a woman followed a man down that alley and didn’t come back out. At the same time as she was following Hiccup, feeling safe and alive and silly in a way that doesn’t usually suit her, another woman not too far away was meeting a very different fate.

She wouldn’t want to talk about that feeling to a crowd either, and in the moment, she resents everyone putting that on Hiccup.

“Ok, we’ve got a bit of a walk to the third site, ever since someone decided that Berk needed yet another frozen yogurt shop, a kind of establishment that no one likes so I’m convinced all twenty seven within official city limits are actually money laundering operations,” he turns around and starts walking straight, grinning when Astrid falls into step beside him and shouting back at the group, “I’ll point out a few things along the way but I’m going to try and make up some time.”

“Rough tour?” She nudges her shoulder against his and he sighs.

“You have no idea.”

“Is that why you’re walking so fast?” She notices a bare hint of a limp in his stride and bites her tongue to keep from asking about it.

“Well, I don’t know if the site is still going to be there.” He laughs, “another condo might have sprung up while I was avoiding stupid questions.”

“You are later than your usual first call to my window.”

“Really, that was more I got to talk about actual facts than the rest of the night combined,” he shakes his head, “but you know, I hadn’t fully decided if vibrantly reliving the trauma of finding a murder victim and the subsequent interrogation was for me or not, so maybe this is a trick by the universe to help me figure that out.”

He always talks fast, but this is something else. Something wound tight and roughed up around the edges, like his usual canal boat commute got replaced with a barrel thrown over a waterfall.

“And the verdict is?”

“Yeah no, not a fan,” he turns around, taking a few backwards steps and pointing to a fire hydrant
that they’re approaching from a different direction than they did the other night, “this is the hydrant used to clean up the blood on the pavement from the second murder, it was outfitted with a standardized hose fitting in nineteen forty-eight, but otherwise, no changes have been made.”

“Hey,” she teases, “you didn’t tell me about the hose fitting.”

“I didn’t?”

“No, you definitely didn’t.” She hears the gossip in the group behind them, absolutely none of it about the hydrant, and talks over it. “I would have thought your private tours would be more comprehensive than the standard group tour, but I guess I was wrong.”

“Like I said, it was your tour, you should have told me about your particular fascination with standardized hose plumbing and I would have made sure to include it,” he smiles and she remembers what his lips felt like on hers. Warm, hesitant, a bit like they look now, like he was waiting for her to affirm that his joke was funny before he continued. “Plus, I think I just assumed you knew, since you know everything.”

“I’ll admit, my standardized hose knowledge is a bit of a flat spot.” Maybe she’s flirting, she’s not quite sure. She knows no one flirting in the history of the human race has said that sentence before, but it feels like flirting, even if she hasn’t finished dwelling on what happened back at her work.

No, not dwelling, not anymore. Deciding.

“What? You didn’t brush up on it in those encyclopedias you were umm…looking at earlier?” His smile widens and he turns away before she can answer, pointing at a building across the street, “that was a boarding house the police ended up renting one room out of to serve as a morgue, given that Downtown Berk didn’t have its own official facility at the time. Hey!” He yelps when she hits his arm before putting a foot of distance between them. “What was that for?”

“That thing with the encyclopedias was your fault,” she crosses her arms, daring him to mention how red she is and immediately regretting it when his expression softens, affectionate again. Like she’s something special he needs to pause to examine.

“My fault? I think the shelf was over-loaded, actually. And ancient, someone should really put in some corner braces or something, it’s a bit wobbly.”

“Not the shelf, the…” she sighs and tucks her hair behind her ear, reaching for something to be a barricade between them so that she has time to finish thinking it through, “I was trying to talk to you and you had to give me your stupid hat and do the stupid sexy chin grab thing and—” She cuts herself off, mortified, and Hiccup narrows his eyes before putting a mock wounded hand on his chest.

“You think my hat is stupid?”

“Yes.” She doesn’t believe for a second that she got away with the second half of that sentence even as he goes back to directing the tour group, leading everyone down a wide, modern alley behind a row of shops.

“So let me get this straight,” he gestures at her, twitchy and treading lightly towards a destination he’s excited about. Her heart stutters and she doesn’t know if she wants to look away or glare at him so she does both, trying to mentally burn a hole in the wall ahead, “it’s my fault that we kissed because the way I grabbed your chin was…” The pause is agony but she doesn’t want it to end, because then she’ll have to face what comes after it. “Sexy?”
The way he says the word makes it obvious that he doesn’t believe it, and she’s as confused and overwhelmed by the desire to convince him otherwise as she was by the urge to save his stupid, annoying tour.

“Yes.”

“Ok,” he nods, “I accept blame. You caught me.”

“I was at work.” She settles for a simple, empty excuse, and he winks again.

“You know, I’m technically at work for about,” he checks his watch and walks backwards towards the mouth of an alley they can’t quite see into yet, “ten more minutes or so. You know, if you want revenge.”

But when he stops, waving an arm in front of the alley, Astrid freezes, staring past him at shapes her brain doesn’t want to decipher.

“Right in this nook behind me, there used to be a small rented room that was torn down to accommodate this lovely hunk of particle board,” Hiccup starts, “and in that room, the body of a twenty-four-year-old woman named Margaret George was found by the landlord coming to collect rent. Her stomach had been cut, throat severed, and all in all the case was a textbook Grimborn killing.”

The tour group is silent, staring past him, through him, and he grins.

“It has never taken me this long before, but I knew I’d get your attention eventually,” Hiccup rubs his hands together, relieved, and Astrid shakes her head. “What?”

A person, or what’s left of one. A body, or parts of one, she’s not sure how much of it is missing or why that’s what she’s concerned about. The spread of it is concerning too, from the parts hung on the walls to the ones flung on the ground.

A person expanded, exploded, demolished.

She raises a shaky hand and points behind him and it seems like he turns in slow motion, freezing when he sees it. Them. The trail of slow drying blood that almost seems to still be flowing, creeping towards the wider alley, towards wider discovery.

“Fuck,” he breathes, “it’s Dave.” As soon as he says it, her eyes catch on the only recognizable part of him, the shiny metal shaft where his left leg used to be.

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When Detective Eretson questions the rest of the tour group before Astrid, she knows it’s not a good thing, especially since Hiccup was directed to wait in the backseat of an unmarked car on the other side of the street. They aren’t giving him time to confirm a story and from the way the officer takes down her witness statement with shrewd, careful notes while most people are being dismissed, she knows who they think he’d talk to.

A team of four or five people in jump suits are going back and forth to a van with carefully labelled plastic bags and the caution tape doesn’t stop her from seeing what’s behind it. Astrid watches Eretson do his questioning to avoid thinking about the crime scene photographs flashing at the edge of her vision.

It doesn’t appear to be going well.
He’s been talking to the man with the glasses for the last ten minutes and he’s tried to walk away twice only to be tapped on the shoulder and brought back into an obviously frustrating conversation.

He doesn’t look like a cop but he stands like one and Astrid tries to focus on why she thinks that. It’s not just the face tattoos, it’s the way they look out of place like vacation photos on a cubicle desk. Like he could be someone who has fun at an amusement park with a wife and two kids, but she doesn’t see any figment of that person now. Then again, if her job was looking at bodies like the one Hiccup’s tour stumbled upon and not avoiding low definition, ancient pictures of them, she’d have a pretty thick work mask too.

The team finally drags a stretcher over to the front of the alley and Astrid closes her eyes, feeling like a wuss and wishing she had someone to defend herself to as she tries to see something, anything else on the inside of her eyelids.

“Miss Hofferson?” Detective Eretson’s voice cuts across creaking wheels and the probably imagined rustle of a body bag.

“Yeah,” she looks up, straight at him, ignoring the streaks on the pavement where the stretcher rolled by.

“How far back?” He asks carefully, his voice as masked as his face, and she wonders what he’d sound like doing anything else. Maybe he doesn’t do anything else, he just orbits from crime scene to crime scene, witness to witness, and the vacation photos are stock he just never took out of the frames.

“Yeah,” she frowns, “how far back?”

“How did you come to be on Mr. Haddock’s tour? Another witness said that you joined partially through."

She crosses her arms, trying to drown the little bolt of anxiety in her chest with reason and logic. Fishlegs was with her at work, Fishlegs saw Hiccup. She did nothing wrong, the detective is just doing his job and his job has nothing to do with her, especially if she tells the right truth right now.

“I did, I was getting home from work when I saw the tour outside of my apartment, it didn’t seem to be going well.”

“What do you mean by that?” He makes a note and looks patiently back at her. Someone walks behind him with an evidence bag that looks too heavy to be anything pleasant and she swallows hard.

“Everyone was asking him questions about the murder last week instead of questions about his tour. He was getting frustrated—”

“Frustrated?” Eretson narrows his eyes and Astrid kicks herself.

“Yeah, frustrated, like a bunch of questions he couldn’t answer were making it really hard to do his job,” she says, nodding at Glasses, who’s still lurking at the end of the alleyway. “You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

The mask melts and he laughs, an exhausted, deep sound that matches the dark circles suddenly obvious under his eyes.

“You have no idea.”
“I think I do, I joined the tour in progress to try and help keep it on track. I don’t know how much that mattered though,” she glances towards the alley where someone is a jumpsuit is taking more photographs and her stomach twists. “This was the last stop.”

“How much do you know about Viggo Grimborn?” He asks, saying the name like he knows just enough to be wildly overwhelmed.

“Not much, really.” And she doesn’t, not compared to Hiccup.

“So you came on the tour to learn about him?” It’s half interview and half genuine curiosity and she shrugs noncommittally, not wanting to say more than she has to.

“Like I told you before, I just moved here, I’m interested in the history.”

“Right,” the mask goes back up and it’s a relief and a curse, the alley oddly lonely again, surrounded by busy jumpsuits cleaning up like they could ever possibly erase what happened.

“Where were you before you joined the tour?”

“I was at work,” the beauty of the truth is that it sounds the same on repeat, “I can get you that information. Hiccup was at my work too, actually,” she adds, making up for her ‘frustrated’ slip by falling again on that alibi sword.

“Is there anyone who could corroborate that?”

“Yes, my coworker.” She nods and he takes down address information as well as Fishlegs’s name.

“Am I free to go?”

“Unless you have anything else to tell me,” he’s a good investigator, confident enough to make people want to share things with him without talking over them. He’d be hard to lie to and she’s glad she doesn’t have to.

“Is Hiccup free to go?”

“Do you have a ride home, Miss Hofferson?” He checks his watch, avoiding her eyeline and effectively shutting her questions about Hiccup down.

“It’s not far, I can walk.”

“Given the circumstances, I think you should let an officer give you a ride.” He waves at a car parked across the street.

Astrid wants to point out that if Hiccup is so dangerous that Eretson is taking him to the station, it should mean that the streets are safe, but she recognizes Snotlout leaning out of the window of the car.

“You headed back to the station?” He asks and Eretson points at her.

“If you’re going to hang around when you’re not on duty, Jorgenson, you can at least make yourself useful.”

“Ok, but you aren’t my commanding officer—”

“Give Miss Hofferson a ride home.”

“Sweet, can do.” He flicks his lights on and off and Eretson shakes his head, nodding once more at Astrid before walking towards the car where Hiccup has been waiting. If they didn’t take his
phone, he probably talked to Snotlout, and he might know more of what’s going on.

“Shotgun,” she says as she gets into the passenger seat and Snotlout blinks flatly at her.

“That’s a felony.”

“What?” She pauses halfway to putting on her seatbelt. “What did Hiccup tell you?”

“Wait, did you guys commit a felony?” He raises his eyebrows, “why can’t he just ask you out like a normal dude—”

“No, he just visited me at work. You were the one who started talking about felonies.”

“Yeah, calling shotgun in a police vehicle is a felony as per the statute of ‘this is my car and you’re going to mess with my shit’—”

“That’s not funny,” she glares at him, looking suspiciously across the dash of controls. She’s never been in a cop car and she can’t say she likes the feeling. The metal mesh between the front and back seats feels like prison bars chasing her as he pulls away from the flashing lights of the still active crime scene and starts towards her building. “I’d give you directions, but I guess you already know where I live.”

“How about a ‘thank you for giving me a ride, Snotlout, I know you need to get back to the station even though it’s supposed to be your day off because Hiccup won’t stop finding trouble’?” He grumbles the last part under his breath and she sighs.

“I didn’t know that, actually.”

“You didn’t know that Hiccup is like magnetically attracted to trouble?” He snorts, “I’ve always said the annoying trouble magnet was in his leg, now I know I’m right—”

“What are you talking about?”

“You know, my bleeding-heart cousin just has to help everyone all the time. Oh, random homeless guy missing his leg?” He puts on a nasal voice, “Well sure, take my old one, it’s not going to look suspicious as hell when you show up murdered. It’s fine, I’m sure Snotlout will figure it out.”

“Crap, you’re right, I hadn’t thought of that,” Astrid rubs her temple, trying to think without flashes of ruined back alleys flitting across her mind.

“I’ll figure it out,” he insists, tapping the heel of his hand against the steering wheel, “what did Eretson ask you?”

“Just the normal stuff,” she shrugs, still unsure if Hiccup told him about the scream or not. She feels guilty about it now, maybe if they’d talked then this wouldn’t have happened.

No, they’re just two murders, there’s no reason to believe they’re linked.

Except the exact locations of the bodies and the condition they were found in and well…Hiccup. No, that’s not fair, correlation can look like causation all day, but it doesn’t matter until there’s intent, and if she knows anything she knows that Hiccup had no intention of stumbling across either body.

But a little voice in the back of her head that can’t quite be silenced ponders the size of this series of coincidences.
“Of course he did,” Snotlout shakes his head, “that’s such an Eretson thing to do. I hate that guy.”

“Why? He seems…competent.” She needs it to be true, worry about Hiccup and herself and a misplaced need for revenge on whoever did that to people all competing to be the loudest reason she hopes the police response is better than what she’s seen in the past.

“You’d think you, wouldn’t you? That guy, always so tall, always helping old ladies across the street and—here we are,” he pulls up in front of her building, “are you freaked out?”

“No, I’m fine,” she brushes him off, worried that if she thinks too hard on the subject she’ll change her answer. She’s slept in her apartment this long knowing about shadowed murderers in the hallway.

“Because I can come sweep your apartment for murderers really quick, you just have to let me raid your fridge—”

“There’s nothing in my fridge,” she sighs, almost asking him to drive her to Ruff’s instead, because she doesn’t think she’ll be ordering food only to wait nervously for a knock on the door. She gets the feeling he’d do it, but he should get back to helping Hiccup. “You know, for someone who complains so much about Hiccup and Eretson helping people, you’re pretty willing to help people.”

“I’m willing to help Hiccup, because he’s my bro,” he gestures at her, “and you’re the hot girl who, for some reason, likes his awkward gangly charms, so by extension, you are also now my bro.”

It shouldn’t make her remember the kiss, but it does, and she tries to change the topic to hide her blush.

“But old ladies don’t need your help?” She asks. It’s not that she’s embarrassed she’s blushing even, it’s that she feels awful and selfish and alive to be thinking of something so inconsequential with bloodstains still stamped in her mind.

“I mean…how old are we talking here?” He winks at her and she sees what Hiccup was mimicking earlier when he was trying to recoup his confidence. It makes her trust Snotlout more than it should, and she punches him in the arm.

“You’re disgusting. Thanks for the ride.”

“Yeah, ok, just assault a police officer for doing you a favor—”

She cuts off the rest of whatever he was saying by shutting the door, but he still waits until she’s inside to drive away.
Detective Eretson’s office isn’t roomy, but it looks bigger for the absolute lack of decoration. Snotlout has been complaining about him for a year, but there’s nothing on the walls except for a very official looking medal that Hiccup doesn’t recognize and the bookcase holds only a cardboard box neatly folded and marked “miscellaneous”. Hiccup can see Snotlout’s nametag on his desk out through the small vertical window, which is crosshatched with wire, the age old answer to bulletproof that actually makes it weaker.

Hiccup’s dad’s office had glass like that. They took it out after he died and replaced it with modern tempered glass, like there was no longer anything inside worth the falsely protecting.

Eretson brings Hiccup a cup of coffee from the breakroom, stale and obviously made that morning, but he accepts it anyway, taking the smallest sip he can while Eretson sits down and logs into his computer. The silence and clicking matches Hiccup’s speeding heartbeat and he clears his throat, fidgeting in the cold plastic chair. Something about the detective’s presence reminds him of his dad getting home after he’d done something wrong but it hadn’t been discovered yet. He learned young that confessing was easier than not, but his dad’s disappointment was heavier to carry than his own guilt.

“What? No bad cop routine this time?” He laughs, the sound echoing off of the undecorated walls, unwelcome.

“That was tired cop,” Eretson pushes his keyboard away and turns fully to Hiccup, eyebrows knit together in a heavy frown.

“What’s this then?”

“I’m good at my job, Mr. Haddock.” There’s swagger there but it’s buoyant, balancing. “And I’m good at reading people.”

“I’m guessing I say ‘won’t try to escape’?” Hiccup rubs one of his wrists and Eretson doesn’t flinch.

“This precinct lets you get away with a lot because of your father,” a jab that hurts worse than when Snotlout says it, “but not murder.” He flips through some photos from the crime scene and Hiccup swallows hard, trying to focus on anything but that flash of metal leg and regretting it. “People who do this don’t look at pictures of it like that.”

“I bet that’s true,” Hiccup remembers the guy who’d invited him over to see his collection.

“It is,” Eretson turns the photos over, “but that doesn’t explain why you keep finding the bodies.”

“So you think the cases are related?” It’s the only thing Hiccup has been able to think about for the last two hours. Or that’s not fair, it’s the only thing he’s been able to focus on.

He thought about his tour, and how it felt like the worst ever but he’s scared it’ll be his best reviewed. He thought about Astrid, one second blushing with her chin held high and the next pale and terrified, her shaky hand telling him to pull his foot out of his mouth and turn around. He thought about Dave and wondered if it hurt.

But he focused on all the reasons the murders can’t be related. Or all the reason, singular, and it doesn’t feel very reliable right now, sitting across the station from his dad’s old office, being
lectured by strong, broad shoulders and an unshakeable scowl.

Lightning doesn’t strike twice until someone puts up a lightning pole.

“Your alibies check out. I talked to Gobber and he affirmed how you knew of the first victim. And I confirmed the tape—“

“What tape?” Hiccup can’t think of anywhere legal he’s been that would be taped and obtained by the cops.

“Right,” Eretson clears his throat and turns back to his computer, clicking again before turning the screen around. “This tape was recorded—“

“The back of the condos,” Hiccup nods to himself, watching grainy black and white footage of Astrid jumping and his arm curling her protectively into his chest. It’s a joke even here, she obviously doesn’t need his protection, but God he wanted to give it to her earlier as she shook, trying not to look into the alley and being unable to look anywhere else.

The memory twists his stomach, caught up in everything else. It was torture to see her scared after seeing her so passionate, defiant, happy. Embarrassed was his favorite, he liked it enough that he pulled off feigning confidence, even though the thought of her kissing him for revenge after trying to save his tour practically made him lightheaded.

Cameras. Astrid texted him that she’d talked to the police about cameras, this must have been why. He wonders what she thought when she saw it.

“This is approximately time of death, given the coroner’s statement and Miss Hofferson confirmed that you walked her home.”

“I did.”

“When does your first Viggo Grimborn tour begin?” He says Grimborn like an American idiom he finds deeply inferior and Hiccup wants to ask where he’s from, but the little Snotlout on his shoulder flicks him on the ear and reminds him not to yap without a lawyer present. He’s not sure when Snotlout got promoted to be both angel and devil, but now’s not the time to dwell on that.

“Seven or seven thirty, depending on the weather, and I try and get there half an hour before to let people know they’re in the right place.”

“Miss Hofferson says I can confirm with her coworker that you were at her job from five to six, approximately.”

“Sounds about right,” Hiccup wills his face not to move but Eretson’s eyes flash anyway, deadly like a predator that isn’t used to starving.

“So, the night of Jennifer Franklin’s murder, you’re attesting to the fact that you made it from 324 Harbor road to the alley behind the Ripped Tavern in less than half an hour, but you’re now claiming that being at the Berk Archives until six is enough evidence to say that you couldn’t have been killing this man at approximately six thirty, according to the coroner?”

Eretson isn’t flip-flopping or changing his mind, he’s trying to steer his investigational sailboat with a strong lean and Hiccup’s lower back throbs.

His doctor doesn’t like him walking eight miles a day on cobblestones and his hips agree. His back is usually willing to compromise but the last week avoiding shortcuts at Snotlout’s request has
done a number on its resolve.

“I’ve been staying out of the alleys,” Hiccup realizes all at once that there’s no way to know that Dave was wearing his old spare leg and the angelic-devil Snotlout on his shoulder applauds him for keeping the secret, “Snotlout—Officer Jorgenson, I mean, said it wasn’t a good idea after the first murder.”

“He did?”

“He’s not particularly confident in my ability to take care of myself,” Hiccup flexes an arm and laughs, the self-depricating sound less welcome in the office than the awkward one. “Ask him yourself.”

“You can’t tell me about it?” There’s frustration there but not disbelief.

“I uh…don’t talk much.” He clears his throat, “I’m shy around authority figures, you know how it is, I’m sure.”

“That’s the first lie you’ve told,” Eretson stands up and opens the door to his office, “don’t—“

“Don’t leave town, I’ve got it.” Hiccup walks out into the lobby, freezing when he recognizes a man in a crisp grey uniform talking to a man in a suit that makes Eretson stop short.

“Detective Eretson, I’ve heard that you’ve met Mr. Grisly—“

“I have,” Eretson answers stiffly, holding out a tense hand at the end of a flexed arm.

“My pleasure,” the man in gray shakes it, everything about him mocking and superior for no externally discernible reason. His accent is Bond villain and he raises a charcoal eyebrow at Hiccup. “It’s good to see you again, Hiccup, it’s been too long.”

“Has it?” Hiccup never thought he’d feel like he was backed against the same wall as detective Eretson by the same force, “I thought you didn’t enjoy your private tour.”

“Enjoyment isn’t necessary for an experience to be…influential.” He laughs, “you didn’t get my joke, by the way.”

“Joke?”

“It hasn’t been a long time at all, I caught you with your hands full the other night.” He’s having as much fun as Hiccup isn’t currently and as much as Eretson has never had.

“With unsanctioned cameras,” Eretson crosses his arms, respectfully glaring at the man in the suit. “I’m close, Sir—“

“The approval just went through this morning, we can’t have the media buzz right now Eretson, I’m calling in all the help we can get.”

“Then talk to another precinct, don’t bring in a civilian organization—”

“Other precincts don’t have anyone to spare,” Eretson’s boss is conclusive, leaving no room to wedge an argument in before he continues, “and Mr. Grisly’s help has the additional benefit of being free, so you’ll take the information he gives you.”

“I’m sure it’s unbiased,” Hiccup mutters under his breath and Eretson scoffs, their momentary agreement lingering as Eretson’s boss walks away.
“I look forward to working together,” Mr. Grisly’s smile is predatory too, but starving. A lion under a gladiator arena starved to amp up its ferocity, but something about the gleam in his eye makes Hiccup think he bolted the lock himself. “This case so far is of particular interest to me.”

Everything impulsive in Hiccup’s body wants to say ‘Grimborn’ but his stomach twists against it, the ghost of a gag keeping the words in his throat. If it’s Grimborn, that means at least two more murders and he doesn’t even want to think about it, especially given his recent luck in stumbling across them.

“Great, more hobby detectives,” Eretson gripes, dismissing Hiccup with a look at the front door and yet another reminder not to leave town. Hiccup wishes that was more of an issue, but he wasn’t exactly planning a lavish vacation before a second murder shut down his tours.

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The shelter is busier than usual, and Gobber lets Hiccup eat if he works, so he finds plenty to keep himself occupied through the next week. Plus, people at the shelter are scared, getting there earlier, every day with new complaints about the Neighborhood Watch Force flaunting badges they’ve been told mean something now. Snotlout is furious but for once, as helpless as Eretson, even though the phenomenon doesn’t seem to be forcing any kind of bond. If anything, Snotlout is angrier, but that could just be the fact that he’s stuck on traffic duty during an important investigation.

Home is quiet though, and Hiccup is restless. As much as his back appreciates the break, he doesn’t need the extra time to think. He could research, given his renewed access and enthusiasm about the archives, but he can’t think about Grimborn without thinking ahead like a meteorologist tracking Hurricane Death. That and as much as he’d like to hang out with Astrid, he’s not sure she feels the same and if she doesn’t, he doesn’t know if he can blame her.

She’s been texting him, mostly pictures from the Berk Enquirer. She found some article from the summer of eighteen eighty-five suggesting an earthquake was actually caused by a dragon fighting ring in a giant arena under the bay and asked for his thoughts on the topic. He said it seemed plausible, given that no one actually knows what’s under the earth as it hurtles through space like a Frisbee and she sent back a string of angry emojis that made him laugh, but flat earth jokes aren’t necessarily communication.

“Oh my God, dude, what are you wearing?” He barely gets two steps in the door after helping Gobber check people into the shelter on Friday night before Snotlout’s outfit accosts him from across the living room. “Or should I say what aren’t you wearing?” Hiccup pulls down the collar of his tee-shirt to mimic the deep V of Snotlout’s shirt.

“What?”

“You left the part of your shirt that covers your lack of tan in your closet, you might want to check on that before you blind someone.”

“Very funny,” Snotlout grabs his jacket, “I’m going to go get a beer, want to come?”

“Even I know I shouldn’t spend my last five dollars on beer.”

“If you want me to cover you, just ask, don’t be so cryptic all the time,” he chides as he rolls his eyes, waving Hiccup along behind him.

“I wasn’t asking you to cover me.” Hiccup clarifies on the way downstairs and Snotlout shrugs.
“Whatever, dude, keep telling yourself that.” He looks both ways before continuing, voice low, “they still don’t know it’s your fake leg, by the way, have you heard anything from Eretson?”

“Nope, apparently I learned how to shut up at a really convenient time, I just needed some pressure.”

“Well keep the pressure on, I doubt your closed mouth is permanent, and they’re no closer to solving this, even with Mr. Creepy skulking around the station.” Snotlout shudders, “the guy isn’t even helpful, he just looms over everyone’s shoulders. He caught me online shopping the other day and he just watched.”

“It’s a good thing I’m sure you were shopping for totally work appropriate stuff, as you always do,” Hiccup raises an eyebrow and Snotlout glares at him.

“Shut up, Hiccup.”

Gruff’s is busy but not packed yet, and they’re lucky enough to get a booth along the wall. Snotlout sends Hiccup to the bar to get drinks and Gruffnut jokes about his growth spurt instead of asking for ID. That’s something that wouldn’t happen anywhere else in Berk these days, the bars down on the main street that charge ten dollars for some locally made shitty whiskey usually end up asking Hiccup for two IDs if he makes the mistake of shaving too close to going. It makes him want to ask how Gruffnut manages to pay rent if Heather is struggling, but he guesses this is a worse neighborhood.

Or was, maybe murders happening so close to the condos will equalize property values a little bit.

Who’s he kidding? They’ll probably skyrocket. He saw his first article relating the current duo of murders to Viggo Grimborn this morning and couldn’t help but read it. It got a lot wrong, even ascribing to the theory that the third victim’s fiancé did it to first scare her into staying off the street and then to cover his tracks, but Hiccup gets the feeling it did what it was supposed to. Someone at the shelter was complaining about motel prices doubling nearly overnight and Berserker Tours added a RSVP tab to the website that Hiccup told himself he wouldn’t check, but when he did it was scheduling three weeks out.

Snotlout dutifully doesn’t listen to Hiccup’s rant about it, staring idly around the room like if he looks bored enough Hiccup won’t know he’s looking for a target. It makes Hiccup think about texting Astrid for what must be the hundredth time this week, and he sets his phone on the table where his pocket can’t accidentally make that decision for him.

“…absolute lying, thieving sack of shit!” The insult rises above the noise of the crowd mid-sentence and a few heads turn towards the end of the bar by the door. Hiccup turns in the booth to investigate and thinks he recognizes the blonde woman yelling at Gruffnut, hands planted on the weathered counter. “Don’t play dumb with me, I know exactly how dumb you are and you aren’t going to get away with acting any dumber than that!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Gruffnut whistles, cleaning a glass with a filthy rag, “must have been Tuff.”

“Is that?” Snotlout frowns, talking mostly to himself. “I think that’s—”

“Ruff!”

Hiccup recognizes Astrid’s voice instantly and jumps to his feet, but Snotlout is already across the room, holding Ruffnut back as she’s trying to claw her way over the counter.
“Let’s calm down here—”

“I don’t need a cop to protect me from my dweeby little girl cousin, Snotlout.”

Ruffnut’s yell is primal and she elbows Snotlout in the chest almost hard enough for him to lose his grip.

“You absolute piece of shit, if you don’t find my money I’m going to kill you and claim next of kin, you creepy body snatching—”

“Ruff, calm down,” Astrid tries again, catching Ruffnut’s arm before she can take another swing at Snotlout.

“I don’t even have to hide it, I can just disembowel it in the street at a specific location and—”

“Hey!” Astrid booms, shoving Snotlout and Ruffnut out of the way and evidently taking the problem into her own hands. “Just give her the money, Gruff. And while you’re at it, I’d like my fifty bucks back.”

“You never loaned me fifty bucks, that was Tuffnut.”

“How about a free round,” Hiccup inserts himself, leaning elbows on the bar next to her and waving sheepishly when she cocks her head, surprised but not unhappy to see him. “Or I’ll tell Snotlout to release the beast over there.”

“He doesn’t listen to you,” Gruffnut narrows his eyes but starts pouring four shitty beers anyway.

“I might not have a choice,” Snotlout grunts as Ruffnut flings herself back against him, trying to kick at the bar, “fuck, she’s strong.”

“Flattery won’t work on me,” she grunts, yanking Snotlout’s arm off of her waist and turning to face him. Her posture changes instantly, hip cocked as she twirls long hair around her finger, “oh, yours might.”

“This isn’t even the first situation this week that my good looks have diffused,” Snotlout grabs two beers off of the counter and hands one to Ruffnut, smiling smugly at Gruffnut, “you should be glad to have me around.”

“Yeah, I’ll be glad to have you around the day it’s legal to charge cops ten percent more.” He grumbles, walking to the other end of the bar to serve someone else, “can’t even have a bar fight with your cousin these days. Fucking nanny state.”

“So…” Hiccup looks at Astrid as Ruffnut and Snotlout head back to the booth, “there’s a story here.”

“Yeah,” she tucks a lock of her hair behind her ear, ponytail slightly crooked, likely from her own attempt to hold Ruffnut back, “I should probably tell it, I doubt Ruffnut has the attention span right now.”

Of course Ruffnut and Snotlout are sharing one side of the booth and Hiccup tries to be casual as Astrid slides in next to him, accidentally bumping his shoulder as she takes off her jacket and sets it between them. It’s not much of a buffer because it smells like her shampoo, floral even above the cigarette smell ingrained decades deep into the wood paneling on the wall, and Hiccup tries to focus on anything but the memory of encyclopedias falling in tune with his pounding heart.
“Guess what?” Ruffnut is too pleased with herself to really look annoyed, “after all, it turns out that Snotlout wouldn’t have minded you giving me his number. All that arguing for nothing.”

“Not for nothing,” Snotlout stretches an arm across the back of the booth, “I didn’t mind holding you back, babe.”

“I mean I’d rather you didn’t hold me back,” she grins, “and we were wearing less or it was strategically pushed aside—”

“Oh my God!” Astrid chugs about half of her beer in a single gulp, cheeks practically glowing and a stern expression on her face. “I’m sorry about her, Snotlout, thank you for helping me save my friend from assaulting someone.”

“Again, I don’t mind,” Snotlout winks and Hiccup usually asks him how he thinks anyone could think that looks cool, but now he’s just remembering how stupid he must have looked doing the same at Astrid and asking her to kiss him again.

And then they found a body.

That’s still a change in tone he hasn’t found a way to navigate.

“I kind of do,” Ruffnut puffs out her cheeks and releases the air in a small, deflated puff, “the holding me back part, I mean. Free beer is my favorite, but it takes a lot of free beer to add up to a thousand dollars.”

“Less to fifty,” Astrid snorts, “I might be up to it.”

“That would be like sixteen of these on happy hour,” Hiccup turns his glass between his hands, “I’m not doubting your power, but…”

“But after the week I’ve had, I might be up to it,” she shakes her head, obviously tired. It looks different than the kind of tired he saw when he showed up at her door too late or too early, or the kind of tired she was when she just had to wait for his eleven o’clock tour to yell one last theory down at him. It’s deeper and he hates that he knows why she can’t sleep.

“So, how do you guys know Gruff?” Hiccup changes the subject before it can drift naturally into Grimborn and all the ways its meaning might be changing.

“Are you kidding me?” Ruffnut points at her face and then absently over her left shoulder with a habitual thumb. “Oh, shit, Tuff isn’t here right now, that would be confusing.”

“He’s Ruffnut’s cousin,” Astrid explains, “and her brother’s doppleganger, it’s a whole long confusing story.”

“Well, I don’t have anywhere to be.” Hiccup tries to feel natural but Snotlout’s easy arm on the back of the other side of the booth makes his heart race when he even thinks about doing the same to Astrid. He remembers what she felt like against him, the strong set of her shoulders under his hands, the curve of her waist, and his entire body itches to pull her into his side now.

Not that there’s any indication she’d let him. She might see him and remember an alley she never wants to see again with him presenting it like Vanna White happily revealing the prize behind door number three.

“He takes my twin brother’s clothes and asks for money or stuff and when he gets it, he falls off the face of the earth again. Last time it was Tuff owing tax money so of course I gave it to him,”
Ruffnut rubs her temple, “I’m too good of a sister, that’s the whole problem.”

“How alike could they possibly look?” Snotlout asks, grinning when Ruffnut is apparently happy to be blinded by his chest.

“It’s…kind of creepy, actually,” Astrid sighs, “I didn’t believe it until Tuffnut didn’t pay back some money I loaned him. He’s usually good about that stuff but he just kept insisting I never loaned him anything, and then I met Gruffnut.” She waves her hand towards the bar, ponytail swinging for emphasis.

“You know, babe, if you had a case for identity theft.” Snotlout waggles his eyebrows and Ruffnut pouts, crumpling into his side, head dramatically on his shoulder. He wraps his arm easily around her waist and Astrid sits up straighter, so rigid if Hiccup didn’t know better he’d think she was a wax statue.

A wax statue that had its post-forming makeup touched up by someone red-green colorblind trying to make an absolutely gorgeous Wicked Witch of the West, but still.

“I wish,” Ruffnut groans, “Tuffnut worships the ground the guy walks on.”

“I get it,” Snotlout nods, “that’s how Hiccup feels about me, some cousins just have that energy.” He grins, looking pointedly at Hiccup’s awkward arm, setting limply in his lap like he forgot how to move it. “Some don’t.”

“I get that you’re pissed, Ruff, I am too, but maybe it’s not the time for the disemboweling threats,” Astrid says it like the words are likely to bounce back at her so she doesn’t want to sharpen them too much.

“Why not?” Ruffnut snorts and gestures at Hiccup, “I’m in the right company.”

“Right, that’s me,” Hiccup nods to himself, “the disemboweled body guy. It’s good to finally officially introduce myself.”

This is going great.

“Oh, we’ve met,” Ruffnut raises an eyebrow, “how’s the tour business? I bet it’s picking up with some crazy mimic on the loose.”

“Babe, I’m not supposed to talk about it, but I can’t help myself around you so I’ll just say that the police have no actual reason to link the murders,” Snotlout tries to steer the conversation and Astrid glares at him. “Aside from, you know, some obnoxious weirdos or whatever.”

“If you’re not supposed to talk about it, maybe don’t talk about it.”

“I didn’t,” he rolls his eyes, “I said what we haven’t found, which is not the same as saying what we have—”

“How about none of us talk about it?” Hiccup tries, drumming his hands on the edge of the table, “anyone read any good books lately?”

“Nope,” Astrid looks at him helplessly then, wide eyes begging him to keep a secret. A bookish secret, apparently.

Oh, their secret. It makes sense that what happened at the archives would get lost in the whirlwind of finding a body, but Hiccup can’t quite stop himself from assuming she regrets it.
“Right, like it’s possible to avoid talking about it,” Ruffnut points at the TV over the bar, where the news is showing a juxtaposition of a picture of the alley from the Grimborn file along with a modern picture.

“…police response has been sluggish, given the repeated nature of the murders and the plausible connection to the Viggo Grimborn case—”

“I’ll put it on Sports Center,” Snotlout stands up and Astrid follows.

“What? So we can watch more Superbowl reruns?”

Snotlout grins, “not a Pats fan?”

“Don’t talk to me,” she shoves him hard enough that he stumbles and makes a bee-line for the tv.

“Is it because you’re a sore loser or what?” Snotlout starts in on his favorite argument.

“Well, there goes his night,” Hiccup tries to joke with Ruffnut even as he watches Astrid’s furious, irritated expression. She takes the remote from Snotlout’s hand and changes the channel, ignoring a few complaints at the bar. “Especially because it looks like Astrid has an opinion on the topic.”

Ruffnut narrows her eyes and Hiccup clears his throat, unused to the position of Designated Normal Person and unsure if he’s doing it right.

“So umm, football?”

“Did you do it?” Ruffnut whispers, leaning close across the table.

“Football?” Hiccup laughs, “yeah, look at me. I was a championship kicker, won the big game for the whole town and—”

“No, the murders,” she clarifies, shrewd even as she tries to look casual. “I’m just saying, it’s a little suspicious that you were giving murder site tours to my best friend both times they happened.”

“No, I did not murder two people.”

“Because I mean it, Astrid is my absolute best friend, and if you’re getting her entangled in some weird serial killer cult, she won’t be the one getting blamed for it.” It’s too matter of fact to be a threat, like the sequence of events already exists in a universe Hiccup really doesn’t want to get to.

“I’m not introducing Astrid to a murderous cult.”

“Well, I know you guys aren’t hooking up because if you were, she’d probably have something more interesting to talk about than stupid Viggo Grimborn.” Ruffnut looks him up and down appraisingly, “maybe.”

“I’m not introducing Astrid to a murderous cult,” Hiccup repeats the truth, willing his expression flat.

“HGTV?” Snotlout scoffs over the crowd, “right, for all the renovating you do in your shitty apartment.”

“It’s aspirational,” Astrid jumps and neatly sets the remote on top of the tv where Snotlout can’t reach it. “Unlike the NFL’s stance that their system is really totally fine even if the competition has devolved into who gets cheated by a bunch of—”
“That’s my cue,” Ruffnut drains her beer and stands up, “she gets on me for threatening my dipshit cousin and then she starts dissing the Patriots in a bar in the middle of Downtown Berk. I don’t know what she’d do without me.”

“Always a pleasure, Ruff,” Hiccup waves before slumping forward, smacking his forehead on the table a couple of times for good measure.

Astrid regrets kissing him, her best friend thinks he’s more likely to be into ritualistic murder than to have a chance with her. He’s broke. Someone might be a ritualistic serial killer and their shared interest in Berk’s history is making him more broke.

He expects Snotlout to start right in on making fun of his absolutely disastrous performance with Astrid, so he’s shocked when someone quietly slides into the booth across from him. He doesn’t expect to look up and see Astrid biting her lip and staring pensively at her beer.

“Where—”

“They just left together,” she cuts him off with an awkward laugh, “just so you know.”

“Ah,” Hiccup pushes his hair back, half-relieved and half-jealous, unsure where the feelings overlap. He’d love to not be here, but Astrid seems committed to being exactly where she is, so he’s committed. “So I’m stuck here for a while then.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much about it,” she shrugs a stiff shoulder, “you’ve met Ruffnut, it’s not like she’s shy about…well, anything.”

“Oh no, not—It’s not about her, it’s for my own good.” He laughs, wishing she’d sat back next to him at the same time as he’s glad to be able to see her face, slowly relaxing away from it’s coiled, anxious expression. “Snotlout’s a screamer.”

She snorts mid-drink, clapping her hand over her nose and coughing.

“Sorry,” he shoves a crumpled napkin at her before re-thinking it, “never mind, I wouldn’t trust anything on this table—”

“I’m fine,” she wipes her nose on her sleeve and pointedly changes the subject, “how have you been? Usually I don’t have to ask because I see you every night outside my window.” She doesn’t mention why he’s not doing tours and that makes it more obvious.

Or maybe it’s obvious all on its own and he’s just skirting the issue by making her snort beer out of her nose.

“I’m good. Fine. You?” He wouldn’t try to deny that he’s asking how traumatized she is. In fact, he probably deserves an award for not tacking on a rating scale. One means she needs a ride to a licensed mental health professional immediately, ten means she’s smart enough to never want to see him again because he’s obviously a weirdo dragging her towards the macabre and it’s not good for her.

He’s hoping for like a six, meaning she’d take a hug but won’t necessarily make him talk about it.

“I just said I’m fine,” her half smile accuses him of being a little bit stupid and he can’t help but remember how soft her lips were. How weirdly sweet she was when she tried to save his tour. How adorably embarrassed she was when she impossibly let it slip that she thought he did something sexy, like that’s a word anyone has ever associated with him, least of all someone like Astrid.
And then they found a body.

“Good.” As bad as Hiccup is at performing the role of Designated Normal Person, he’s even worse at having nothing to say.

“Thanks, by the way,” Astrid clears her throat, sniffing like there’s still beer where it shouldn’t be, “for not telling Ruffnut about…you know, the other day.”

“Which part?” Hiccup scratches the back of his head, “because I think she knows about the whole umm…finding a body part, given she thinks I’m the killer.”

“She doesn’t seem to get that people can have a shared interest and nothing more.” Her words sting but her blush doesn’t.

“Right, shared interests always lead to ritualistic murder,” he nods, elbows on the table as he leans a little closer to not have to say murder so loud, “I don’t see the flaw in that logic.”

“Either murder or the inevitable ‘sex in a murder alley’ she keeps insisting is a thing.” Astrid is either very cruel or has no idea of her ability to short circuit minds.

“Yeah, that sounds pretty morbid and drafty,” Hiccup laughs, his heart slamming around his ribcage apparently untethered, “plus, if ritualistic murder alley sex was on the table, your apartment is already a murder site so…” He swallows hard, wishing the floor would do the same to him. “Not a new one—"

“Don’t remind me,” she says seriously, clearly choosing not to hear the worst of what he just said, and he’s an idiot who can’t take an out.

“So no point in risking the public indecency charge, I guess.” He gestures between them and shakes his head, “not that ‘murder alley sex’ is a thing that exists at all, let alone with—you know, you. Or me. Or—"

“Don’t you mean my apartment isn’t a new murder scene yet?” Her laugh is humorless and heavy as she cautiously meets his eyes. “I hate to even say it, but do you think it’s a Grimborn thing?”

Hiccup’s stomach twists and looking into her tired face, he wishes he was a better liar, “I guess we’ll find out.”

“If it is,” she looks at him carefully, her assessment entirely perpendicular to Ruffnut’s, “if someone is killing people like Viggo Grimborn did, how can we just sit there doing nothing? If this —what are you going to do about it?”

He knows the correct answer to that question. It’s been drilled into him again and again since before he can remember. Hell, probably since before he could walk.

The police are dealing with it. The system works. Getting in the way only slows down the process. But he can’t say that because Astrid knows that means nothing. It’s an empty thing he’d say to tell her to move on with her life while people are getting hurt, to pretend that mental blinders do anything other than hide suffering. And she’s too smart for that. Too smart and too honest to go along with it.

And she doesn’t scare easy.

“Probably something stupid,” he shrugs and she nods, apparently satisfied with the answer.
“Sounds about right.”
Astrid is a believer in hard work.

There are very few obstacles in life that can’t be overcome with determination, willingness to get her hands dirty, and dedication to the cause. However, deciphering her feelings while sitting across a dingy bar table from Hiccup’s sharp jaw and green eyes, holding a beer she got from her best friend’s cousin who now only owes her forty-seven dollars while said best friend and Hiccup’s cousin hook up might be one of those outlying obstacles.

And that’s not even unpacking the fact that she only met Hiccup because he was giving serial killer tours to her apartment, the past tense being because a new set of twin murders interrupted his route with the promise of further interruptions. And then that gets even more complicated because not only did she and Hiccup kiss while she was at work, but later that same night she was with him when they discovered the second murder victim, seconds after she accidentally called him sexy.

Or not him specifically, but something he did, and that’s almost worse.

And she might be able to scrape together some plan of attack for all of that, but adding the fact that he also happened to discover the first body after a middle of the night private serial killer tour he gave her where they were caught trespassing and practically hugging on camera pushes it over the edge.

She’s lost.

And there’s the whole thing he’s been in custody twice in as many weeks but she still can’t stop thinking about how he looked at her, like he absolutely couldn’t handle not kissing her for another second. Even though she was being stubborn and loud and forcing her opinion on him. Maybe even because of those things.

Neither of them knew what to say while they finished their drinks and their interaction devolved into silence occasionally punctuated by people watching commentary. He offered to walk her home, but she took an Uber because as safe as Berk’s new condo developments brag about being, she doesn’t live in one of those.

She lives in yet another Grimborn murder site, likely on a list to be revisited.

Yet another complication.

“You’re thinking about that ship roster really hard,” Fishlegs sits down at his desk, flicking through his meticulously maintained planner.

She half wonders what Fishlegs would say about her current conundrums. He’s got the kind of analytical approach she can really admire, but his opinion of Hiccup is clear and deserved. It was Hiccup who pushed her against the bookcase and threatened his precious encyclopedias, after all.

“It’s complicated.”

“Want to talk about it?”

She thinks a minute, “no.”

Astrid doesn’t want to talk about it. She wants to do something about it, she just doesn’t know
what to do.

Hiccup (4:23pm): hey are you at work?

She hates how the silent implication makes her cheeks burn.

Astrid (4:24pm): yeah

Hiccup (4:25pm): oh cool, would you mind if I dropped by and got a copy of that Al, I. Safe picture to laminate? The one you gave me is wearing out quick and it’s smeared not that you care I’m sure it smeared in your fervent quest to prove me wrong

Astrid hates how she can’t deny that her stomach flips. If Fishlegs repeated his concern right now, she’s not sure what she’d say, but he disappeared into the back room to organize new donations.

Astrid (4:27pm): sure

Hiccup (4:28pm): be there in like 5?

Her heart stutters and she tries not to care. She can’t help but hate how she left it at the bar, the weird backward walk towards the door, the insistence that she get a ride rather than walk. And now she has to deal with another random, instantaneous meeting? She needs time and planning and for it to occur away from Hiccup’s undeniable pull.

She tries to focus exclusively on her work but every time she hears the door open she jumps and has to reread at least a paragraph. The first is the mail, the second is someone lost and hoping for the library upstairs, but the third is Hiccup, determinedly faking casual as he trots down the stairs with uneven strides she still wants to ask about.

“Hey!” He says too brightly and Astrid purposefully takes a second too long to look up.

“Hi.”

He pauses a couple feet in front of her desk and swallows hard. He shaved recently, and he looks younger and sharper and somehow more likely to catch her off guard.

“Are you doing something super important for the future of Berk’s history’s maintenance or…”

She can’t quite stifle her smile, “not really.”

“Great,” he grins wider, all crooked teeth and genuine excitement and everything would be so much easier if Astrid’s heart didn’t skip like a turntable in a hurricane. “So, Al. I, safe message? If you don’t mind…”

“Right, sure,” she stands up too quickly, chair rolling back a few feet and smacking into a bookshelf.

“No rush,” Hiccup laughs, shoulders rigid and hands waving at her chair, “wouldn’t want you to break something in your excitement to help me copy something.”

“I haven’t put it away since last week, I still need to talk to Fishlegs about how we’d recategorize it as Grimborn-related,” she ignores his comment about breaking things and leaves her chair where it is, leading him down the familiar aisle between old yellowed papers to the table she set her findings out on.

“Does that mean there’s a special stack you send Grimborn-ologists to so that you don’t have to
talk to us?"

“Well, that would be my solution,” she flips carefully through the paper to the picture, trying not to think about the vague wrinkles in the print from his hand clenching as he kissed her. “But currently Fishlegs’s solution is to just send them all my way.”

“Let me guess, it’s been busy?” He skirts around mentioning the recent murders, but it doesn’t matter. Sometimes it feels like all she talks about lately, as she leads curious, insensitive people to documents she then has to make sure they don’t take as a souvenir.

She nods, “I hate to say you’re right, but you are pretty well adjusted, considering the crowd as a whole.”

“What makes you say that?” He cocks his head, reverently taking the paper from her and following towards the copier. The encyclopedias mock her when his hand brushes against her arm.

“You know, there was the guy who wanted his girlfriend to lay on the floor to pose like Elizabeth Smith,” she wrinkles her nose, “but I don’t know how even that compares to the guy who got angry at me because I didn’t magically produce modern crime scene photos to compare to vintage ones. He claimed this was a ‘decaying institution’ because I explained we obviously don’t have access to current police case documentation.”

“What an idiot,” Hiccup snorts, “this is a historical archive, there are obvious environmental controls to prevent decay.”

“That’s bad,” she doesn’t understand how he can melt more stiff tension than she can think through with a bad joke, it must go hand in hand with how he made her feel safe in dark alleys when logic and reality continually affirm she was anything but. “Come on, that was lame.”

“It got a smile,” he says, self-satisfied but not smug, and his eyes narrow when he sees the copier, “we meet again, old friend.”

“What?”

“The copier and I have history, remember? I tried to copy a comic book three years ago and jammed it up,” he sets the paper down picture up on the work table and pats the top of the copier with a careful hand, “the foundation of Fishlegs and my blood feud, as you put it.”

“Right,” she takes the paper and carefully folds it back to align the picture with the corner, “maybe I should press the buttons then, I wouldn’t want to involve myself in that drama.”

The copier is probably older than some of the archive’s collections and it takes a minute to turn on, its wheezing fan turning the silence awkward as Astrid’s worries whir back to life along with it. Hiccup is alternating between staring at his feet and the side of her face, brows furrowed.

“Thanks for letting me come by, by the way, and for the picture. And for finding the picture, in the first place, even though you were only doing it to prove me wrong, which you did, it clearly does have punctuation—but that’s not what I mean.” He doesn’t pause to breathe so much as to let the mental gears behind his eyes rotate fully so that he can pick back up where he got off track. “I uh… I guess I understand all the very real reasons you probably want nothing to do with me—”

“What?” She turns to face him, frowning.

“I’m just saying I get it, and I appreciate you being cool about it even as I’m… practically having a spasm over here trying to talk to you,” he laughs, high pitched and nasal, his arms flailing and
smacking the copier. It coughs and she has to press the start button again. “And considering the size and scale of ass I made of myself at Gruff’s the other day, I get that other things that might have ummm…been said or occurred are likely voided, as it were—not that there was any kind of contract when you said and did them, I was just amazed someone as, you know, astounding as you seemed to be starting to like me, maybe—”

“Hiccup,” she reflexively puts her hand on his shoulder, sure that if she doesn’t hold him down he’ll vibrate into another dimension, “I let you give tours to my apartment, do you think I’d do that if I didn’t like you?”

“Oh,” he thinks on that for a second, eyes darting to her hand on his shoulder, and she carefully retracts it, flushing as he half smiles. She gets that bone deep feeling she’s going to regret what she just said as he opens his mouth to say something, but then thinks better of it and presses his lips together in a tight line.

The copier spits out a single, un-smeread picture and he reaches for it, already leaning away from her like he’s planning a great escape. That isn’t allowed and she grabs it before he can, setting it on the small table behind her and crossing her arms.

“What’s your problem, Hiccup?”

“Problem?” He blinks, long eyelashes adding to the innocent façade, “I wouldn’t say I have a problem, I think I just—the long and short of it is I met someone really…amazing, but I pissed her off before I even officially met her and for some reason she forgave me enough to go on a private tour with me and it felt—I don’t know, like we—but it doesn’t matter, probably, because then there was a murder. Except maybe it does matter because then we kissed and it was,” he’s so red he’s practically glowing but his frantic energy is dissipating with every word, like he’s exorcising himself of it, “and then we found another murder victim, together, which isn’t my ideal date or not date or…activity.”

“Mine either.”

“It’s not the association I really wanted, you know?” He winces but his chuckle is real, “but at the same time I don’t blame you if you look at me and see, you know, a modern times Grimborn murder re-enactment scene.”

“I don’t,” she looks at him a little too hard, taking in his open, nervous expression and the hope there that he’s trying and failing to put out. “You know, your problem sounds pretty similar to a problem I’m having right now.”

“Yeah?” He isn’t bad at pretending to relax, but his stiff upper body doesn’t fool her, “did me blurring it all out like an idiot help?”

“Maybe,” her small smile feels tired, “at least we’re on the same page.”

“That’s all I’ve been hoping for since you found this picture,” he points at his copy, “which is still amazing, by the way, I don’t think I’ve said that enough.”

“Just another thing wrapped up in Grimborn.” She shakes her head, “my apartment, my job, my…” She looks at him importantly, fumbling for a word that could encompass everything he just said and the way she feels when she looks at him. Excited and comfortable at all the wrong times.

“So we just don’t talk about Grimborn then,” Hiccup shrugs, shoulders forcefully easy as he leans back against the copier, knuckles white where his hands are gripping his upper arms.
“What else are we going to talk about?” Astrid pulls the original Enquirer out of the copier and folds it carefully on the table next to it, trying not to feel his eyes boring into the side of her head.

She knows he doesn’t ignore advantages and this time it makes her hold her breath.

“We could talk about the fact that you like me,” his voice dips at the end, conspiratorial, and Astrid can’t shake the feeling that the papers are listening, adding information to their tightly stacked volumes and storing it for later. “I’m kind of still wondering how I managed that.”

“Who says it’s not your Grimborn knowledge?” She wishes he was wearing the hat. The hat makes him bold and winking and silly, an act she can act back at. He’s vulnerable in an unzipped jacket and band tee-shirt she wants to ask him about and it’s an invitation to be vulnerable too.

She usually clicks tentative yes on those, hoping people get it means no.

“I thought we weren’t talking about him.”

Astrid can imagine all of those stories in all of those papers, all the people largely forgotten and lost in their own environmentally controlled, ink preserving worlds, turning away out of a well-deserved kind of respect. She keeps their secrets legible after all, the least they can do is keep her secret.

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I can be a little intense,” she edges closer, finger messing with the copier buttons while she drags her eyes to his. Green even in the dingy corner of the room, soft and shy and locked on hers like he’s not going to let either of those things stop him.

“A little?” The corner of his mouth quirks into a quiet half smile, eyes squinting with that eternal curiosity that feels heavy and light and warm when directed at her. She could bring up Grimborn and re-direct it, but as convenient as that would be, she doesn’t want to.

“Most people want me to back off,” she tucks her hair behind her ear and watches him suppress a smile, “you don’t.”

“Back off? As in decrease the intensity?” He laughs, long arms flailing, hand brushing her arm and shrinking back, cautious and hopeful and jittery. “Never, why would—if anything increase it. More is better, right?”

She lets it hang long enough for him to get nervous, for the hope to condense into worry and indecision and the urge to open his mouth to keep convincing, “more intense then, is what you’re saying?”

“I umm,” he clears his throat, eyes scanning her face like he’s checking that she’s real and giving her reason to prove that she is, “wouldn’t mind. I welcome it, actually.”

Somehow, he still manages to be surprised when she grabs the back of his neck to pull him down to her, hands flailing and hitting the copier again when she kisses him.

Astrid will never admit to anyone, personalities trapped in hundred-year-old papers included, how many hours of sleep she lost not to thinking about murder, but to lamenting the fact that Hiccup kissed her before she kissed him. The cheek doesn’t count, that was impulsive and embarrassing and looking back with what she knows now, everything would be a lot less complicated if she’d acted on her full impulse then.

He wouldn’t have been stumbling on a body fifteen minutes later, for a start.
Kissing him first is better, she likes his shocked pause and sharp inhalation against her cheek before coming back to life with soft, careful lips.

It’s good for a lot of reasons that Hiccup recovers quickly from shock, but right now the only one that matters is his hands settling warm on her hips and pulling her closer. He kisses like he talks, meandering and endless, lips pressing trailing anecdotes along her jaw while she desperately wants him to get to the point.

The copier creaks and chimes when she leans harder against him, one hand in his hair and the other sliding under his jacket to feel the sharp lines of his shoulder blades. He feels stronger than he looks and his light grip on her hips feels teasing, half the story when she needs it all now. She nips at his lower lip to hurry him along and he manages to stumble while standing still, fingers digging into her sides for support at the sharp snap of breaking plastic behind him.

“Shit,” Astrid pulls back and Hiccup kisses down her neck, nose dragging along the collar of her shirt and making her shiver, “we’re breaking the copier.”

“I’ve fixed it before,” his breath is cool against the damp trail he left under her jaw and she closes her eyes, willing herself to pull back.

“Astrid is the one to talk about Grimborn with, it’s not really my specialty,” Fishlegs voice shatters the tension and she stands up too fast, straightening her shirt and wiping her mouth on the back of her hand.

Hiccup is not as quick, staring at her with a dazed, open expression, lips kiss swollen and hair sticking up on one side. She grabs his hand and pulls him away from the copier, swearing when one of the plastic trim pieces clatters to the floor, the clips on one side snapped off.

“Fix it fast,” she shoves it into his limp hands, trying and failing to pat down his hair as another voice joins Fishlegs’s.

“Ah yes, Astrid, I’ve been waiting to meet her,” it’s accented and polite, but something about it sends a chill up Astrid’s spine that has nothing to do with Hiccup struggling to make the trim piece stay in place.

“Oh?” Fishlegs is defensive, again, and she’s really going to have to talk to him about that.

“For the investigation.”

“Do you have duct tape?” Hiccup whispers, but it’s too late as Fishlegs is coming around the corner with a tall man in a gray uniform that matches the sinister undertone in his voice. Hiccup thinks fast and leans back against the copier again, holding the trim piece in place and waving at the newcomers.

“Hey Fishlegs,” he says brightly, despite Fishlegs’s scowl, and then his voice drops flat and unimpressed, “Mr. Grisly.”

“I should have expected to find you two together again,” the man in gray holds out his hand and when Astrid shakes it, it’s icy, not even vital enough to be clammy. “Mr. Grisly, head of the Neighborhood Watch Force, I’ve been invited to help investigate the recent murders and I understand you were unlucky enough to encounter a victim.”

“Yes,” she resists the urge to wipe her hand on her pants when he lets go, “I gave my statement to the police.”
“Of course, I’ve read it.” His grin is as dead as his touch, everything animated about him condensed in his eyes. “You have an interesting perspective on all of these unfortunate happenings.”

Saying luck and fortune too many times too close together makes them sound like badly veiled intention.

“I wouldn’t say I have much of a perspective at all,” Astrid shrugs, tucking her hands in her pockets, “all of it is in that statement.”

“You were hear to ask about Grimborn,” Fishlegs cuts into the conversation and Astrid is surprised that she doesn’t mind his protective tone for once, “I can actually help you with that.”

“Actually, I don’t think I’ll be needing your help, not with the real Hiccup Haddock expert right here.” Mr. Grisly gestures at Hiccup with those waxy fingers and he raises his eyebrows, shifting against the copier with a scrape of plastic that would be funny and awkward in any other tense situation. Here though, it just sounds like a pin dropping during a stealth mission, a weakness on display to someone looking out for one.

“I wouldn’t call myself a Hiccup Haddock expert,” Hiccup laughs, deflecting, “I know myself maybe a five out of ten at best, you might want to talk to Officer Jorgenson about that one.”

“I was speaking of the Viggo Grimborn suspect Admiral Hiccup Haddock.” Grisly’s chuckle is gravel thrown through a window, all solid malice and sharp edges, “although it does inform the current case to hear how clueless you are about your own actions.”

“Not my actions so much as my intentions,” Hiccup blanches, shrugging like there’s some hope of pulling this situation back towards the casual. “And my reasoning. Basically my trajectory in life, but I’m pretty solid on my own actions. What do you want to know about Admiral Haddock?”

“I’m just curious about the connection.”

“There’s no connection, the original book is fiction,” he elbows Astrid for corroboration, “right? You’ve read it.”

“Bad fiction,” she agrees and Mr. Grisly smiles.

“My favorite. Can you recommend me a version?”

“Uh,” Hiccup looks at Astrid out of the corner of his eye, realizing he’ll have to move, and she tries to look casual putting her hand on the piece of loose trim. Her fingers brush a little low on his back when she does and she can’t hide her blush with a stoic expression so she just tries to avoid Fishlegs’s eyeline. “Sure, I know where they are in the library upstairs.”

“How helpful,” Grisly’s approximation of delight is more menacing for his dedication to it.

“Anything for the investigation,” Hiccup steps carefully away from the copier and looks at Astrid seriously for a second, “talk to you later?”

“I’m sure you will,” Grisly and Fishlegs say in unison with exact opposite intonation, Fishlegs’s arms crossed as he purposefully stands in the way and forces Hiccup to walk around him on the way to the stairs.

Hiccup and Mr. Grisly are barely out of sight when the other side of the copier trim pops free, waving in mid-air.
“And he broke the copier, again.”

Astrid sighs, taking the trim piece off and setting it on top of the machine, “to be fair, we both had a part in that.”

“He broke the copier,” Fishlegs raises an eyebrow, “and I told you to check out a study room.”

“Nothing happened, we were just…arguing about Grimborn.” She rubs the back of her neck, willing the heat to dissipate from under her hair.

“Right, that always gives me a hickey,” he looks pointedly at her neck and she pulls her hair forward to cover it.

“It won’t happen again,” she nods, “and he said he can fix it.” She doesn’t mention the duct tape comment, there’s no way that would go over well. They don’t even have scotch tape at their desks because glue and old documents is such a bad combination.

“What do you see in that guy anyway?” Fishlegs oversteps, yet again, but Astrid’s almost glad that someone finally asked. “You used to be so determined to get him away from you, what changed? And why does he have to be here so often?”

The last question dents her last clinging scrap of resolve and she lets it go.

“Has anyone ever thought you were a little too academic, Fish?” She tries out the nickname, letting this feel like friendship even though that risks more awkward questions.

He snorts, “there was a time in elementary school that I legitimately thought my middle name was ‘get your nose out of that book, young man’.”

“One second it was something to be proud of that I was the first Hofferson to go to college,” she shrugs, faking noncommittal even though that word has never applied to her, “but when I came back having learned things, suddenly I was uppity, disrespectful. Hiccup…he seems to like it when I’m right. He doesn’t even mind when I’m loud about it.”

“Here I thought we were bonding,” Fishlegs smiles, “I thought you were finally going to admit you’re just fascinated with the top hat.”

“You caught me,” she punches him in the arm and he winces, “come on, that did not hurt.”

“I barely know you Astrid, and I’m as sure that you are freakishly strong as I am that you aren’t uppity or disrespectful,” he rubs his arm and weighs that, “well, disrespectful to priceless collections of Brittanicas, maybe—“

“Shut up about the encyclopedias or I’ll hit you again,” the threat is empty and friendly and final, getting Fishlegs off of her mind and letting her wonder about Mr. Grisly with her full attention. She doesn’t hesitate as much as she would have thought before texting Snotlout, hoping for a little illumination, as he doesn’t seem very good at keeping his mouth shut.

Astrid (5:02pm): some guy calling himself Mr. Grisly just came by my work

He doesn’t answer right away and she tries to focus on work, but documentation isn’t really holding her attention after all that happened in the last hour. Especially knowing Hiccup is just upstairs with ostensibly the creepiest man she’s ever met while her lips are still tingling from that kiss.
“So this is the glamorous job that lets you afford your own place,” Ruffnut interrupts, strolling down the stairs and perching on the edge of Astrid’s desk, wrinkling the corner of an old shipping manifesto.

Seeing Ruffnut hasn’t brought on so much relief since that first night in her apartment when someone downstairs started yelling murder.

“My job is to keep stuff like this safe,” Astrid pokes her friend’s butt until she scoots off of the paper and then sets a heavy book on it to press the creases flat. “And my apartment is cheap. What’s up?”

“Tuff needed to drop off a check upstairs so I thought I’d come say hi, like the thoughtful and attentive friend that I am.” Ruffnut’s smile says otherwise and Astrid sighs, still ultimately glad for the distraction. Her eyes were starting to glaze over trying to find a reason to name a stupid shipping manifesto for thirty bushels of apples as important in any way, especially when so many other things obviously are.

“You’re here to brag.” Astrid doesn’t expect the flash of frustration, bordering on jealousy, given that she and Hiccup have been on however many not dates by now and Ruffnut is the smug one.

“I was going to say gloat but brag works too,” she laughs, “also, I did forget to get his number so if you could help me out with that…”

“You’re telling me you never found a moment of pause to get his number?”

“Nope.”

“Ok, gloat is a better fit, I see that now.” Astrid’s phone rings, Officer Snotlout Jorgenson flashing on the screen, “speak of the devil.”

“Wait, why’s he calling you?” Ruffnut tries to snatch the phone but Astrid beats her to it, “he should be calling me.”

“Then you should have given him your number,” she picks up, too aware of Ruffnut leaning down on the other side of the phone to listen, “what’s up?”

“I’m not actually a weirdo who calls people, I just don’t want a written record of bitching about Grisly as long as I have to see his stupid face at work every day,” Snotlout starts, “what was he doing talking to you?”

“Just asking about the investigation,” Astrid glares at Ruffnut, turning her office chair away so to try and minimize the eavesdropping. It seems smart given she can’t trust Ruffnut not to run around threatening disembowelment. “The investigation that you’re calling about, the one with the current murders and I happened to find one of the bodies, so it pertains to me.” She drives in the point.

“Duh, Astrid, keep up,” Snotlout laughs and she grits her teeth.

“Not having a problem with that, thanks, but who is this Grisly guy?”

“Thought you were all caught up,” he teases but apparently thinks better of it and continues, “no but it’s probably good you know because Hiccup won’t remember not to antagonize those NWF fucks—”

“NWF?”
“Again, since you’re so caught up, I’ll pause and explain that Grisly douche is the leader of these pseudo-police assholes acting like they own the place because a few condo developers are paying him out the ass to keep the streets clean, because apparently public cops aren’t good enough for rich people.”

Astrid groans internally, remembering Hiccup mouthing off while trying not to remember his mouth.

“Well, I wish I’d known that a minute ago because he left with Hiccup—“

“Shit,” Snotlout sighs, “I love the guy but keeping him out of jail is a full time job.”

“Ugh, you guys bonding over your boyfriend being an idiot is boring,” Ruffnut groans, “give me the phone, I’ll ask for his number.”

“No,” Astrid shushes her, but it’s too late.

“Is that Ruffnut? Is she there with you?”

“No.”

“Give her your phone, I have to tell her something,” he pushes and Astrid rubs her temple.

“Is it your number? Because then I could stop being your go-between.”

“Nah, it’s about last weekend—“

“No, I’m hanging up now,” Astrid doesn’t wait for an answer before doing exactly that and turning back to Ruffnut. “Are you done gloating?”

“Since I can tell you’re done listening to it, sure,” she shrugs, “the gloating was mostly just a bonus anyway, I was going to ask if you wanted a ride home.”

That’s almost sweet enough to mute her annoyance and she starts to thank her for the offer and decline, but then she thinks of what Snotlout said and the hollow, manic look in Grisly’s eyes. The idea of him being in command of people doesn’t scare her, but it makes her nervous. She’s never been less sure that this whole situation is only going to get worse and she hates it.

“Sure, I’ll take a ride, I was just about to pack up anyway.” Astrid declines an immediate call back from Snotlout and texts Hiccup instead.

Astrid (5:21pm): how’d that go?

“Sweet, more time to get that number out of you,” Ruffnut grabs Astrid’s bag for her.

“Not a chance.”
Chapter 12

Hiccup tried valiantly to talk Mr. Grisly into a Grimborn book containing actual information but all attempts were brushed off repeatedly with the insistence that he’d been given a budget to hire experts for that.

Hiccup didn’t miss the dig that he is not considered an expert at the level of A. M. Mildew, but he wanted Grisly out of the library more than he wanted to argue. He knows Astrid doesn’t need his protection, but the way Grisly looked at her was uniquely sinister and the lopsided kind of glee in his voice when he talked to her is stuck in the back of Hiccup’s mind like a popcorn kernel in his teeth.

By the time he finally gives up and watches Grisly leave the library with a single beloved but largely sensationalized book, the archives are closed, and Hiccup finds himself suddenly completely underwhelmed. Given that he has not shifted his schedule back while his tours are… temporarily postponed, he texted Astrid pretty soon after waking up.

All in all that was a pretty landmark start to the day.

He starts the long walk home, glancing wistfully into alleys as he crosses them. He can’t help but feel disconnected and exposed on the main streets, surrounded by false modernity made out of plywood with a million percent markup. He knows Snotlout is right. He does look suspicious and he’s hiding enough by not telling Eretson where Dave’s prosthetic came from, but he’s sick of it taking so long to get everywhere.

Plus, assuming a Grimborn copycat working backwards, doesn’t he just have to stay away from the second murder site?

Unless the order of the two murders was a fluke and he should be staying away from the first site, a stomach clenching thought that’s categorically impossible. He couldn’t stay away from Astrid now if she lived in a volcano or had a loft in Atlantis, not after she told him that she likes him. Him. She likes him. Astrid. The beautiful, violent toothbrush assault artist who makes sure he sees what she does likes him.

His phone buzzes with a slow to download text message, lagging from the library’s thick brick walls.

Astrid (5:21pm): how’d that go?

He stops short and a man in a suit slams into his back, glaring at him for interrupting the flow of pedestrian traffic. Hiccup would thank the guy for restarting his heart, except talking is a little hard with it pounding in his throat.

How’d that go? Does she want…a review of some kind? Should he inform her of her 10.0 perfect score kissing skills but deduct a half a gold star for startling the hell out of him? Not that he minded being startled, really, but Astrid seems like a tough love type.

“How’s that go? Does she want…a review of some kind? Should he inform her of her 10.0 perfect score kissing skills but deduct a half a gold star for startling the hell out of him? Not that he minded being startled, really, but Astrid seems like a tough love type.

“No bikes on the sidewalk, asshole!”

If he critiques her, does that mean she’s going to critique him? She doesn’t let him get away with
anything else, after all. If he weren’t so giddy about her kissing him, he’d be more confused that she still wanted to after all that murder site sex idiocy that fell out of his mouth at Gruff’s.

Hiccup (6:04pm): I thought it was nice

He settles for neutral or something like it.

Astrid (6:05pm): I meant the creepy guy making you find a book for him

His heart drops. Of course she meant the whole Grisly thing, not—why would she be asking him how kissing was? She was there.

It’s a twisted kindness that he knows he’s said and done dumber things to and around her, so this probably won’t be the instance that scares her off.

Hiccup (6:06pm): right that makes more sense than you asking me to critique your kissing
Hiccup (6:06pm): which was top notch by the way no comments, don’t change a thing
Hiccup (6:07pm): so I do it anyway, fuck, anyway grisly is creepy as hell and I really hate that he’s investigating murders, it’s not fair because his breath’s death count is probably higher than any small time grimborn copycat

None of that made it better.

Astrid (6:07pm): I thought it was nice too
Astrid (6:08pm): so you really think it’s a copycat then?

The morning’s roller coaster of emotions repeats in miniature and Hiccup pauses to unlock his front door and set his stuff down inside. Maybe his dad’s old chair has enough common-sense energy left to keep him from making more of an ass of himself and he flops into it.

Hiccup (6:11pm): no, we aren’t talking about grimborn, I forgot sorry
Astrid (6:12pm): it’s fine
Hiccup (6:12pm): no, we said we weren’t, let’s…talk about the next time we can not talk about grimborn
Astrid (6:14pm): is that a euphemism?

He blinks at that text for a second, trying and failing to shove his comprehension of it back into a neat little cube that will let him think or breathe or do anything but burn remembering how she felt against him.

Hiccup (6:15pm): Tomorrow?

And he has no money. Very minimal money at least. Not the kind of money that adults have for dates when there are euphemisms involved. Not that he’d pay for them like Viggo Grimborn luring some unsuspecting woman into an alley—this is why he’s single.

Astrid (6:16pm): Sure, what do you want to do?

Everything. Nothing. Ask questions and actually let her talk, for once, but that would require a personality transplant apparently and he doesn’t have time for one of those. Plus those probably cost money. Maybe he could pay for it with that frozen yogurt gift card, hell using a frozen yogurt gift card would practically be a personality transplant in and of itself—
Hiccup (6:16pm): frozen yogurt!!!

Astrid (6:17pm): so you’re…adamant about frozen yogurt, alright

Hiccup (6:17pm): oh no, I hate frozen yogurt, but I have no money and a gift card

Astrid (6:18pm): you know I can pay, right? This isn’t the middle ages, you don’t need to demonstrate your chivalry to me.

Hiccup (6:19pm): oh, I know, plus I’d cry if you expected me to put my hat down on a puddle so you could cross it

Hiccup (6:20pm): I guess…this sounds weird but bear with me

Astrid (6:20pm): I think you just defined every interaction we’ve ever had

Hiccup (6:21pm): In a roundabout way, getting frozen yogurt sounds like a good idea because taking you places that I love has had really weird and complicated results, so maybe the answer is to take you somewhere that I hate

Astrid (6:22pm): it’s a date

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Anything for me?” Hiccup yawns on his way out of his bedroom the next afternoon when they wake up, watching Snotlout juggle a shoebox sized cardboard box and a handful of envelopes through the door.

“Looks like a credit card offer and a student loan notice,” Snotlout holds out the box for Hiccup to take his mail.

“Two of the four horsemen of the adult apocalypse,” he tosses the credit card offer and opens the loan statement with a grimace.

“You know you can get those online right?” Snotlout sits down on the couch with the box in his lap, using the butter knife from his morning toast to open it.

“Hey, I sold my soul to the devil for an Art History degree, I want the hard copy receipt.” The number on the notice looks worse than normal though and it takes Hiccup a second to put together why.

It’s not about being able to pay for Astrid, she’s obviously not someone who cares about stuff like that. It’s about not…dragging her down. It’s different when Snotlout is the only one who sees him survive on ramen in the summer when tour interest goes down, Snotlout has seen worse. It’s different when he has a pocket of cash too.

He started doing tours for his own entertainment, he helped Heather start her company when it was all about the mystery for both of them. It was the notoriety that bugged him and that only amped up when the crime scenes got a fresh coat of caution tape.

But right now, staring at that number that really does keep growing when he doesn’t pay it, he’s reminded full force that he also does tours for the money.

“I’ve been thinking, I should start tours up again,” Hiccup sticks the mail to the fridge and nods to himself, “yeah, that’s a good idea, Berserker tours must be booking months out by now, I could get full share of the spontaneous customers. Any idea if there’s any issue at the crime scenes?”
Snotlout doesn’t mock him, which should be his first clue that something isn’t right, and when he turns around, Snotlout is staring into the open box on his lap with a pale face and wide eyes.

“What’s wrong?”

“This isn’t my self-tanner.”

“You ordered self-tanner?” Hiccup raises an eyebrow and crosses the room to see what is so offensive to receive in self-tanner’s stead.

It’s not skin bleaching cream, which would have been apt.

It’s a foot.

A foot standing disembodied in the shabby cardboard box, almost waxy in appearance, harmless except for the dread emanating off of it. Hiccup’s never seen an unattached right foot before, and he can’t say it was on his bucket list. There’s a note taped to the lid of the box and smeared with streaks Hiccup doesn’t want to think about, so he tries to focus on the letters. They’re blurry either from damp paper or his struggle to keep his eyes still on them, but he can see they line up in neat rows.

It reminds him of a letter he saw in glass in a collector’s museum. A letter that had been delivered wrapped around a victim’s finger and sent to Deputy Detective Ryker over a hundred years ago. A letter that had led to his eventual stint in custody.

“Is that a poem?”

“It’s a foot!” Snotlout jumps up, holding the box at arm’s length and shuffling towards the kitchen, “I know you only have one but you should still recognize it!”

Hiccup leans over the box when Snotlout sets it down, squinting at the writing and willing his heart to slow down enough to let him read, “is that in comic sans?”

“It’s a fucking foot,” he starts pacing, pulling his phone out and presumably dialing the station. “Yeah, I’ve got human remains in a fucking box—no, they were shipped here, are you crazy, Johnson? Yeah, maybe send a car, that’s a fucking brilliant idea, great job!”

Thoughts of Grimborn letters, fingers, Snotlout’s badge, and disconcertingly, of Astrid wondering what he’d do if the murders continued rush through Hiccup’s head as he fumbles with his phone, snapping four or five quick pictures of the box, as close as he can to the message.

“What are you doing?” Snotlout snaps as he hangs up and Hiccup holds his phone up.

“Oh, you mean—”

“Yes, I mean, are you taking pictures of evidence for your creepy collection? Because it’s bad enough that I touched the box,” he shudders, “oh shit, I set it on my lap, did I get dead foot juice on my junk?”

“No—”

“Are you sure?” Snotlout is more preoccupied with his lap than Hiccup’s phone now, but it’s still better to pad the lie.

“No, I’m not taking pictures of for my creepy collection.” He’s taking pictures for another reason,
so it’s not technically a lie, “I’m texting Astrid that I doubt I’ll be able to make our date today.”

Hiccup (4:00pm): I don’t think I’m going to be able to do anything today, do you want actual reason or wild excuse?

“Yeah, they’re sending a car over,” Snotlout huffs, “goddammit, I thought I had one day without Eretson’s smug face—but no, some creep had to send us a hacked off foot, great.”

Astrid (4:02pm): actual reason

Hiccup (4:02pm): snotlout received a package that he thought was the self-tanner he ordered, but actually was a disembodied foot, and there’s a blurry message with it in a font I believe to be comic sans

Astrid (4:03pm): I had to read that three times to make sure I didn’t accidentally say wild excuse

Hiccup (4:03pm): raincheck?

Astrid (4:04pm): Don’t go spending that gift card without me

“Dude, put your shoes on,” Snotlout throws Hiccup’s shoes at him, one of them hitting him in the side.

“Hey!”

“They’re outside,” he points at Hiccup’s plastic left foot, “that’s a secret, remember?”

“Shit,” the rush to yank his shoes on is a perfect capsule of the anxiety that multiplies over the next hour or so as a forensic team takes the box and swabs what feels like every inch of the apartment. Snotlout isn’t happy to be in the back of a police car, even if he knows the officers in front, and he’s less happy to be plopped in Eretson’s office on the wrong side of the desk.

It doesn’t help anything that they’re both still in pajamas.

“About the self-tanner, dude,” Snotlout clears his throat, looking out the office window and presumably checking if Eretson is on his way, “it’s going to be really natural and gradual, you weren’t even going to notice.”

“That’s what you want to talk about right now?” Hiccup’s phone burns a hole in his pocket, and he hates how much he hates Heather. He needs to show it to someone. Then again, Heather wasn’t trustworthy when he trusted her.

“I watched a video on how to apply it—”

“Yeah, did it include directions to the jersey shore?”

“You mix it with your moisturizer for the first week and the color grabs slower, plus I have black chest hair, it was going to blend!”

Eretson opens the door somewhere between jersey shore and moisturizer, as stony faced as Hiccup has ever seen him.

“Mr. Haddock, Jorgenson,” he sits down and starts typing efficiently, not so much avoiding eye contact as metering his attention where he sees fit.

“It’s Officer Jorgenson to you, thanks,” Snotlout crosses his arms, flexing too obviously, and
Hiccup elbows him. Officer doesn’t make anything seem better right now. The whole reason Deputy Detective Ryker spent two months in custody as Grimborn was because they could blame the bungled case on him.

“You’re not on duty, Mr. Jorgenson, in fact I believe I overheard you planning a beach vacation, don’t let my investigation interrupt it.” When he does look up, it’s at Hiccup in particular, “at five o’clock this time?”

“I know how you love your job?” Hiccup shrugs and Eretson sighs.

“So, Mr. Jorgenson, you received a package of unknown origin—“

“I thought it was from Amazon,” Snotlout tries to kick his feet up on the desk but they don’t quite reach and Hiccup rubs his eyes to avoid seeing Eretson’s reaction.

Hiding his eyes doesn’t help, every ounce of repressed irritation comes through in the detective’s pinched voice.

“Was the package addressed to you?”

“I was expecting a package so I opened the package,” Snotlout scoffs.

“You didn’t check if your name was on it?” Hiccup hisses at him and he flings his arms up, still trying to look bigger.

“I ask the questions,” Eretson doesn’t quite pound his hand on the table but the intent is there, and Hiccup tries to mentally will Snotlout to behave but his skull has always been too thick for that. “The package was addressed to an SG Jorgenson, is that you?”

“Those are my initials.”

“And they stand for?” The detective readies himself to write it down.

“My names,” he deflates, “Snotlout Gary Jorgenson, but—wait, someone sent me a cut off foot? That’s super fucked up.”

“Yes, you’re getting it, murder is fucked up” Eretson sets down a picture of Dave, or his body, coroner sheet thankfully pulled up directly under his chin. “The foot was an exact match to Dave Ralston.”

“Well I don’t know that guy,” Snotlout lies semi-convincingly, “I definitely don’t know why anyone would send me his foot.”

Eretson turns to Hiccup, “I understand you knew Dave Ralston from the homeless shelter.”

“Are you saying I mailed Snotlout a foot of a homeless man I knew in passing?” Hiccup’s fear manifests as it always does, a reason to be indignant and loud. He thinks of that leg and how he can remember having it fitted, learning to hobble on it and imagining toes. “Because no, that didn’t happen.”

“Your alibi for—“

“I was at the archives, you can talk to Astrid, you can talk to Fishlegs—“

“The package was mailed from the archives yesterday in the last package pickup at 4:30,” Eretson glances out his office window and Hiccup does the same, trying not to wince when he sees Mr.
Grisly, talking to someone he can’t quite see.

He can’t lie.

“I was—“

“With Astrid,” the detective fills in, “of course.”

“I have texts,” he fumbles with his phone, but of course his camera is still open, the bloody note tiled in the corner as the last picture he took and he shoves it back into his pajama pocket. If he starts tapping his foot, it might creak, he didn’t fully tighten it down before they had to leave. “I can send them to you or something. To keep the um…encrypted dates for official—“

“Well Grisly was there too, right?” Snotlout trusts the office’s soundproofing far more than Hiccup would. “Who says he didn’t do it? It seems like the kind of creepy shit he’d do—“

“That’s enough,” Eretson booms, the sound reverberating like a ghost off of the walls. Snotlout opens his mouth to continue and Hiccup smacks him in the arm, shaking his head.

“Guess that beach vacation is cancelled, huh?” He nods at Eretson in understanding, “good thing you can get the same golden glow from a handy bottle that won’t take us out of town.”

“I’ll be following up.” Eretson gestures at the door and Hiccup leans carefully on Snotlout’s shoulder to stand, making sure his leg doesn’t creak or buckle or give itself away when it takes his anxious weight.

“Sure thing,” Hiccup drags Snotlout from the room before he can decide to go back onto tiptoes or something equally stupid. Of course, that means it’s Hiccup’s turn to be stupid and he balks outside the door, eyes widening when he sees who Grisly is talking to, “Heather?”

“Hiccup,” Heather cocks her hip, holding a thick, official looking file that isn’t labeled with her usual red sharpie. Someone else’s file. A police file. “Nice…jumpsuit.” She looks down at his plaid pajamas and he knows her too well to ignore her concern. It’s deeply buried but there and he glares at Grisly. Not even Heather deserves to deal with Rasputin’s mangy ghost.

“Miss Berserker is the Grimborn expert we hired, she’s already been explaining the concept of Trader Johann to me,” Grisly grins and maybe he’s exactly what Heather deserves, “very concise and articulate.”

“Yeah, easier to feed conjecture in small bites—“ Hiccup starts, but Snotlout grabs his arm. “I don’t know though, ‘Zombie Trader Johann’ is a little hard for anyone to swallow.”

“When solving a mystery of this magnitude,” Grisly chuckles, “we must consider all angles. Right down to resurrection.”

“Hiccup, let’s go,” Snotlout tugs and speaks a little too loud, clearly for Heather’s benefit, “don’t you have that date to get to?”

“Are you still doing tours?” Hiccup ignores him.

“Dagur’s taking over some of them,” she tries to sound professional and he remembers her wide grin when he showed her the ‘All Safe’ wall for the first time. Astrid’s picture is a piece of proof she doesn’t have, and it doubles his compulsion to get it out there. “Are you still—“

“I will be,” he nods, “I’ve got some new evidence.”
“I’m sure you do,” Grisly cuts off the conversation and points at the door, “official police business, I’m sure you understand.”

“He does,” Snotlout grumbles, glaring up at Grisly as he shoves Hiccup along, either barely remembering to mind his leg or getting lucky that he’s not causing a limp. “When we get home, I’m going to take a shower, because I swear I got dead foot juice on my lap, and then I’m going to look up ‘how not to be weird and morbid’ in your freaking office, and shove whatever book I find that definition in up your—“

“Gobber?” Hiccup once again stops short as Snotlout tries to forcibly drag him from the police station yet again. Eretson must have snuck around while they were talking to Heather, because he’s at the front desk with Gobber, discussing some notes.

“Can’t say I’m glad to see you here,” Gobber chuckles, “but I’m always glad to see you. And oh, you have Snotlout with you.”

“Yeah, I know, you must be thrilled to see me too,” Snotlout grins, apparently finding a new thing to hold over Eretson.

“Eh.”

“Well, I can’t say I’m glad to be here, not really my choice,” Hiccup glances at the detective.

“Oh, I’m sure you look guilty for something,” Gobber leans sideways and whispers loudly to Eretson, “it’s his specialty.”

“No, assuming I’m guilty is everyone else’s specialty,” Hiccup crosses his arms, leg feeling shaky like it never does.

“Aye, cops especially, so it’d be fastest if you let the handsome detective do his job—“

“Handsome?” Eretson isn’t used to being caught off guard and it doesn’t last long. “Of course, you were making a pass at me, and here I thought you were the only one in this damn town trying to help.” He collects his files, mumbling under his breath as he stalks back towards his office, clearly further from leaving the office than ever.

“Can’t it be both?” Gobber shrugs and Hiccup shakes his head.

“Twenty five years of friendship and you sell me out for a hot piece of ass?”

“I don’t think it counted as friendship when you were a baby.”

Snotlout scowls back towards the offices, “who cares about friendship? I’ve been working out just as much as he does, why does he still get everything?”

“For the best probably,” Gobber shakes his head, “you couldn’t handle me.”

Hiccup blinks at his father’s best and oldest friend, “you know, Gobber, thanks for that. Now I won’t have nightmares about mutilated body part mail.”

“Anytime.” He nods and this time it’s Hiccup dragging Snotlout outside.

Snotlout wasn’t kidding about the immediate shower, and he must have been serious about the ‘dead foot juice’, as he put it, because he throws his pajamas in the kitchen trash on the way back to his room to get dressed. Hiccup doesn’t like thinking about them in there and Snotlout agrees as
he ties up the mostly empty trash as soon as he’s dressed, looking around at the ghost of forensic swab marks on almost every surface.

“Yeah, no, I don’t want to hang out in the foot-mail apartment right now,” he shudders, “Gruff’s?”

“Oh, sure,” Hiccup glances at his dad’s office door, wanting to print out one of the pictures he took and start deciphering it, but knowing if he wants to research right now it’ll be suspicious.

“I’m sure a girl as hot as Astrid already has another date lined up, you can talk to her tomorrow.” Snotlout sighs, “just put on some actual pants and come hang out until I stop thinking about…saw marks and—”

“Yeah, ok,” Hiccup doesn’t make him say it, swallowing hard against his own repressed memory as he changes. For the first time ever, he avoids looking down at his right foot and trips a little getting into his jeans because of it, but he shakes it off to engage full scale Snotlout distraction mode. “So, did you notice Eretson had a mustard stain on his shirt?”

“What? Where was it? Was it on his tie?” Snotlout snorts, “I bet he eats sandwiches like an idiot.”

Hiccup makes up enough details about the imagined stain to preoccupy Snotlout the entire walk to the bar, even throwing in a few fake laughs at a very bad impression of a British accent. He’s not quite cheerful by the time they’re sitting at the bar, but he’s cheered enough to start his version of the standard cop lecture.

“As little as possible actually means as little as possible in this situation,” he gives Hiccup a disappointed look, “like if you want to make Heather jealous, just tell her you have a date like a normal person, don’t say you’re going to start your creepy tours back up, especially at a time when that Grisly dick thinks Venison Greenland has something to do with the murders.”

“Ok, I’ll work backwards on that,” he numbers on his fingers, “Venison Greenland isn’t even clever, I am going to start tours back up, and I don’t care about making Heather jealous. And my date was cancelled by a surprisingly efficient postal shipment, which makes me wonder—”

“You can’t start tours back up right now, dude.”

“As I was saying, it makes me wonder if the person behind all of this has some sort of government sway,” Hiccup nods importantly.

“I can’t tell if you’re bullshitting me to avoid talking about Heather or not.”

“I don’t know why you always want to talk about Heather.” Hiccup stares at the row of dusty bottles above the bar and tries not to think about their comfortable nights at the Ripped Tavern, before things got contentious. Heather’s pet theory was Ryker before it was Johann and it makes his stomach churn.

“Because she was my friend too and I always thought shit would get weird in the group because you two paired off to have a murder themed wedding or something,” he shrugs, “not because you disagreed about research.”

“Snotlout, my issues with Heather are with her, if you want to be her friend that’s between you guys.”

“Are you kidding?” He snorts, “even before she teamed up with Mr. Grisly she screwed you over. Not a chance.” It would be sweet if Snotlout didn’t punctuate it by punching him in the shoulder so hard he almost falls off of the stool.
And if that package didn’t neatly line Snotlout up with Ryker.

“I’d have way better luck getting back at her by restarting tours than by making her jealous with some cancelled date.”

“You know what sucks? I used to be able to explain to you that girls care more about you moving on with another girl than they do about hundred-year-old murders, but now you’ve got Astrid whispering Grimborn in your ear—”

“Oh god, don’t go there,” Hiccup winces, “not today, haven’t I been through enough? Didn’t you hurt me enough by hitting on Gobber—”

“I wasn’t hitting on him, I just don’t know why he was hitting on Eretson when I was right there.”

“Probably because he’s known you literally your entire life.”

“Yeah, and so has your mom—”

“I’m restarting tours,” Hiccup cuts that off, “I need the money, for one—”

“Amen to that, Hiccup,” Gruffnut leans on the other side of the bar and glares at Snotlout, “it’s tough not being employed by the government to be a narc, isn’t it?”

“Just because I’m the only one with a job that makes money doesn’t make me a narc.”

“Oh, I do plenty for money,” Gruffnut numbers off, “I dress up as my dumb boy cousin and scam people, I wipe the counters, I pour beers for people, I sell alcohol for way more than I pay for it—”

“Except for the first thing, those are all just part of being a bartender,” Hiccup points out and Gruffnut shakes his head like it’s heavy with exhaustion.

“I know, right? I go above and beyond and I still barely make rent,” he whispers conspiratorially, “all the toilet paper in the bathroom is stolen from McDonalds.”

“I can hear you,” Snotlout shoos him, “so if you don’t want me to tell McDonalds—”

“See? Narc.” Gruffnut shuffles off to the other end of the bar.

“You could get a job, you know, with a boss and a paycheck and insurance that you don’t have to pretend to be my domestic partner to get.” Snotlout doesn’t need to know how much he sounds like Hiccup’s dad sometimes, it would go to his head.

“Yeah, I’m sure the five-year gap in my nonexistent resume would be great for that.” He sighs, “I guess I’m worried about…if I’m not giving tours, Heather’s basically controlling the whole Grimborn narrative in Berk and now she’s apparently working with Grisly, who—I didn’t tell you this because I didn’t think it mattered but he came by the archives yesterday—”

“I know,” Snotlout rolls his eyes, “Astrid told me.”

“Anyway, Grisly wanted a copy of that Admiral Haddock book, which means that the so called ‘experts’ at the station aren’t exactly people I trust with the truth.”

“Just a couple of weeks ago you were saying how shitty Heather was to be giving tours to active crime scenes.” Snotlout orders another beer, foot tapping against the rung of his stool, and Hiccup still never knows how to act when his cousin is worried about him.
It’s even harder when the feeling is mutual.

“I guess I was really hoping that this wasn’t connected to Grimborn,” Hiccup shrugs, “but now with the modern equivalent of the Ryker finger showing up at your—our door. Our door. I guess that me not doing a tour didn’t prevent the body part mailing, but maybe I could calm down the hysteria a bit while Heather is too busy to dump gasoline on the flames.”

And he can see what kind of information is spreading. Call him paranoid but this is all starting to circle a little too close to home.

“That’s stupid.”

“Well, I’m stupid,” Hiccup is at least keeping his promise to Astrid with that one.

“Yeah you are, given you’re actively deciding to harass Astrid’s apartment nightly when she’s your alibi for a bunch of sketchy shit.”

Hiccup opens his mouth to tell him that Astrid doesn’t mind, but then he remembers something she said when he thought she wouldn’t read a book, let alone go on a private tour with him.

“Can I borrow fifty bucks?” He stands up, “and I mean borrow, I will pay you back when this all works out.”
Chapter 13

It’s not the season for frozen yogurt. Astrid’s heat is still on, finally keeping the fog from spreading icy fingers up her windowpane at night. She’s still wearing fuzzy socks around her apartment to keep her corresponding heating bill down, and so she shouldn’t be disappointed that there was no frozen yogurt. Especially when there are bigger things to worry about.

Of course it’s all wrapped up in Grimborn, like everything is lately. She knows Hiccup said no Grimborn, that they’d talk about other things, but untangling it seems dangerous, like pulling a seedling from dirt too early.

The first knock blends in with the drums in the single headphone she’s wearing but the second is out of tune and she sits up straight, yanking the earbud out by the cord. She’s not scared, she’s just aware that she lives alone at a historical murder site potentially being targeted by a potential copycat murderer.

The third knock is quieter, an almost hopeful tap-tap-tap, and she freezes.

What kind of murderer knocks?

Definitely not someone so rigorously loyal to Viggo Grimborn’s techniques, which her current paper’s research has tangentially confirmed to unanimously be surprise attacks. But techniques change.

Including victim’s techniques, she thinks to herself as she walks quietly to the door, grabbing her umbrella from the plastic hook by her coat. Stabbing would be deadlier but she’d have more force with a swing and she chokes up just above the curved handle to look through the peephole.

It’s Hiccup, chewing on his lip, nose blown out of proportion by the curved glass.

“Shit,” she tosses the umbrella aside and pulls her bangs out of their clip before adjusting the oversized tee-shirt that feels suddenly inadequate. Softer than she’s sure she can be without quiet stacks or heavy brick walls to dampen it. She told him that she likes him and that introduces enough vulnerability on its own without trying to change the subject between them.

She checks the time and he knocks again, even softer this time, like he’s giving up.

“What?” Astrid’s voice comes out too harsh as she yanks open the door, frazzled like a hastily thrown umbrella.

“Hi,” he raises his eyebrows and looks her up and down, inquisitive and pale, a plastic bag in his hand. “Am I interrupting something or—ah shit, it’s late, isn’t it?” He checks the time on his phone, “is it? I forget—“

“No, I mean it is late, but it’s fine,” she tries to flatten her bangs and it doesn’t quite work, and his lips quirk up in a maddeningly personal smile. He looks tired. “Just working on a paper, what’s up? How was…”

His text made her snort and she still feels guilty about it. Guilty for laughing at something so clearly not funny and strange because it made her miss him in a way she didn’t expect. She wanted to see his face when he sent it instead of hearing it second hand, wanted to see his wide-eyed processing, but it doesn’t look like he’s processed it at all.
He shrugs, “I brought you something.”

“That bad, huh?” Her dry laugh makes his lip quiver and he steps forward too purposefully to be abrupt, wrapping wiry arms around her shoulders and pulling her into his chest. The plastic bag crinkles against her hip and he rests his cheek against her temple. He takes a deep breath like he’s centering himself, hand curling in her shirt.

“Sorry, I didn’t—” His voice is a little thick and she moves instinctually, arms curling around him, one hand almost daring to stroke his lower back. He’s a sturdy kind of fragile, asking directly for and taking what he needs, and she doesn’t want to disturb it. She doesn’t know him well enough for that yet.

“No, it’s fine,” she rests her forehead on his shoulder, wishing he hadn’t done this in the hallway where she feels invisible eyes on her door, “Snotlout with self-tanning lotion, huh? I can imagine the trauma.”

“You have no idea,” he exhales, cool breath ruffling her hair as he steps back, pulling the bag between them and opening it by both handles. “But I got you something.”

“You didn’t have to get me anything,” she reaches down and pulls out a plastic wrapped square of folded cloth.

“I did though,” he grabs something else he apparently left leaning against the wall and hands it to her. “You asked for this.”

“A curtain rod?” It’s a better weapon than an umbrella, she guesses, “why did you get me a curtain rod?”

“Because I’m starting up tours again,” he pulls a drill out of the bag and pulls the trigger, making it spin with an excited, approval-seeking smile. “Sound-proof curtains. Or not soundproof, sound-blocking. Your idea, and not a bad one—“

“Get in here,” she grabs the collar of his tee-shirt and pulls him inside enough to shut the door behind them.

“I saw your uh, single chair,” he spins slowly, looking around her place and taking it in the way he does archive aisles, “was red, so I got red curtains, but—“

“You’re starting tours again?” She ducks down to meet his eye when he starts tinkering with his drill instead of looking at her, “you realize that’s…”

“A way to pay my bills?” His smile is a grimace.

“A really stupid idea, right?”

“The curtains are 84 inches,” he strides uneven across her living room and reaches above her window, notching the drywall with his thumbnail, “so if the rod is right around here—“

“Hiccup.”

“The selection of curtain rods in stores open this time of night was…odd, half of them looked like —“ he’s bright red when he glances up at her, “well, not particularly ornamental, so I went generic. This will take five minutes,” he holds his hand out for the curtain rod and she sighs.

“This is sweet, or something,” she’s worried and tired and hates how she’s obviously getting in the
way of the one thing he’s thought of to feel better about his own situation. And it is sweet, and combined with his hopeful expression and capable hand around his power tool, it’s hard to say no. “But I’m never going to get my security deposit back if you drill into the wall.”

“Oh, I talked to Gobber,” he assures her, marking the other side above the window and frowning to himself, hand on his chin, “I forgot my level—”

“Hiccup, you can’t restart tours,” she gets close enough to grab his shoulder, but his face stays focused on the window until she moves her hand to his cheek to turn his head. His eyes don’t follow and she snaps, “look at me.”

“Five minutes,” he nods, finally looking at her with fleeting focus, “Gobber said it was fine.”

His jaw flexes against her palm and she presses her thumb against his lips to shush him.

“If you’re installing curtains, will you talk to me about this?” She moves her thumb, trying to ignore the tingling flair in her stomach.

He nods and she lets him go, crossing her arms and watching him take the curtain rod out of the package, throwing the instructions over his shoulder and examining the small bag of hardware that came with it.

“You good with that height?” He revs the drill again as he turns around and holds a screw against the drywall.

“Sure,” she couldn’t care less about the curtains, “so, what—”

“Ok,” he talks over the drill as he seats the screw, “so I know I said no Grimborn, and I meant it, as in we don’t always have to talk about Grimborn. I want to talk to you about other things—”

“It’s fine.”

He looks over his shoulder at her, holding a screw in his mouth and managing a muffled sound that she thinks is supposed to be, “really?”

“I don’t have anyone else to talk about it with,” she shrugs, “and since it’s your fault that I care at all…”

He takes the screw out of his mouth and mounts it on the opposite side of the window, “my fault, huh?”

His tone reminds her of the other things she’s blamed him for, most notably knocking encyclopedias off of the archive shelf. He took that blame easily, but it was probably softened. He’s not sexy now, he’s frazzled and trying and obviously exhausted, but she wonders what would happen if she said it anyway. Then again, everything he said at Gruffnut’s bar when he was being as awkward as physically possible makes her think he’s not particularly interested in her apartment as anything other than a pit stop on a Grimborn tour.

But here he is putting up curtains so it isn’t anymore…

“Absolutely your fault. If you hadn’t been so annoying with your tours that I wanted to demolish the mystery, I would have learned to hate Grimborn just how Fishlegs did, by dealing with a constant onslaught of weirdos come to attempt to steal papers.”

“Well, I’m selfishly glad that didn’t happen,” he takes some hardware from the curtain rod box and
hangs it over the screws, lining up another screw to anchor it into place, “but I still…I’m going to sound crazy—“

“I’m used to it,” she shrugs and he gauges her expression before drilling in what she thinks is the last screw.

“You mentioned the Ryker theory to me, you know, back in the days when I only got to talk to you if I annoyed you enough that you leaned out your window to yell at me,” he nudges her with his elbow on the way back to the bag, where he starts unwrapping the curtains themselves. “How much do you know?”

“He was a cop tangentially involved with the case,” she takes the trash from the curtains from him before he can throw it on the floor and walks it to the trashcan. “If I remember right, he spent some time in custody for the murders but was then found not guilty.”

“The umm, the evidence,” he gestures at his feet—foot—and bites his lip like he’s unsure he can trust her with what he’s about to say.

“Yeah?”

“It was sent to Snotlout, addressed to him with a middle initial, and he doesn’t tell anyone his middle name because he hates it—which he’s one to talk but—“

“Do you think whoever’s doing this is trying to make it look like it has something to do with Snotlout?”

“You know the Ryker finger, right?” He shakes the first curtain pane out and sets it on the back of her chair to take off his jacket. She doesn’t think she’s seen his arms before, and her eyes dart between faded freckles, tracing over lean muscles that attest to wild gesticulation as a viable workout routine.

“It came with a note,” she nods as he pulls out the other curtain pane and bites his lip, uncharacteristically quiet at her admission of Grimborn knowledge. “What?”

“I told you this package did too,” he busies himself with unfolding, “well, umm, I took a picture of it—“

“You took a picture of it?” She’s too loud and she wishes for the first time that he’d hurry up with the sound insulation. “Are you crazy? You took a picture of a…a foot that someone sent to—“

“No, no, not the foot. I avoided the foot, I just took one of the note. A few to make sure I got it, it was kind of…damp with—whatever, it was blurry, so I got a few,” he pulls out his phone and shakes his head, “I haven’t had time to look at them yet because Snotlout wanted to get a drink, understandably, but…well, it’s definitely Comic Sans. We’re clearly dealing with a sadistic lunatic.”

“We?” She tries once again, just as futilely to tame her hair, and he shrugs, filling out the shoulders of his faded red tee-shirt better than she would have guessed, “so, sadistic lunatic, what was your first clue?”

“The murder and mutilation was a start but the font choice really drives it home,” he laughs and holds his phone out to her, “do you want to—“

“I thought you said you haven’t looked at it yet.” She’s seen him with new Grimborn information and the idea that he’d willingly let her see something first again is kind of flattering. Flattering
enough that she struggles to squelch her growing curiosity with horror.

Apparently there really is a threshold, at some point horror can’t grow anymore and the surplus transitions into a call to action. And if there’s a Ryker finger allegory, what are the chances this is all a coincidence?

Hiccup’s face says more than statistics do.

“I trust your interpretation,” his eyes are too big, too trusting, and she gets that he’s nervous to read it but even more nervous to admit to it, “or I guess I trust you to have an interpretation I can argue with.”

“Sure,” she takes his phone and sits down in her chair, “I’ll have a look while you finish up.”

“Thanks,” his crooked grin is relieved and brighter than he’s been since he got here. Relieved even.

“No problem,” she squints at the blurry but clearly Comic Sans letters and tries to ignore the reddish smudges on the bottom right of the screen, jumping when Hiccup’s warm hand lands gently on her shoulder. “What?”

“Sorry, you’re just sitting against the um,” he tugs at the new curtain and she leans forward.

“Oh, I guess it really does match the chair then,” she clears her throat, trying to ignore the heat rising to her face as his thumb brushes the side of her neck, “good eye.”

“I’m glad you don’t hate it,” he laughs, “it did feel a little weird decorating your apartment for you, so really, if you hate them I can—“

“They’re fine,” she insists, sighing in twisted relief when the warmth of his hand disappears and he’s back across the room messing with the curtains.

She breaks the cardinal rule of looking at pictures on other people’s phones and swipes to the next picture, quickly zooming in on just the note before she can see anything else. This one is clearer, the blur from the damp paper instead of the camera moving and she holds his phone closer decipher the words:

All Right, I’ve made my second impression,
Maybe it’s time I introduce myself.
I’ve got an interest in making you think,
maybe on your feet or outside the box,
inside this one though, lol, and going back
in time to make Berk what it could be.
No more rudderless grime, only directed,
Detectible Crime

A shiver runs down her spine as she reads it through a few times, trying to make sense of words that are almost right. The capitalization and strange cadence read like a Grimborn letter but the ‘lol’ sets it apart as modern. New. Ongoing.

“So, what do we have here?” Hiccup’s voice appears suddenly in her ear, his arms folded on the back of the chair, forearm pressing her braid against the back of her neck.

“A…really creepy note,” she leans into him instead of away, both irritated that he brought her into this and glad he didn’t have to do it alone.
“Here,” he kneels behind her, chin nearly touching her shoulder as he cranes his neck forward to read the blurry text. His lips move along with what he’s reading, brows knitting together in a deep frown. Even as he’s pale and still, his arm is warm on the back of her chair and she looks at him to avoid looking at the note anymore. His jaw muscle twitches and she remembers kissing him, as out of place as laughing at his text. “That’s… a modern Ryker letter, isn’t it? I guess Comic Sans is the new misspelling due to lack of education.” He jokes but it falls flat against his pale face and sharp, serious expression.

He looks for her opinion, too close to look that deep into her eyes, gaze darting up to her messed up hair and down to her shirt, pausing to read the words on it. It’s from a national park in her hometown and she clears her throat, trying not to think about the note and how she can see a day or two’s worth of stubble on his chin when he’s this close. About how he’s warm and honest and this is the first time they’ve ever been truly, absolutely alone.

“I agree,” her voice is smaller than she expects and she clears her throat, “but it has the misspelling too. The All Right,” she points to the text on his screen and he reaches over her shoulder to grab his phone back.

“Well, it was a right foot,” he swallows hard and weighs the fact, or maybe the fact that he said it so frankly, his arm shifting against the back of her neck. If he feels her goosebumps, he doesn’t say anything. “Thanks for looking at that for me.”

“With you,” she acquiesces, “you just gave me a head start.”

“Still, I—really, sanity check, but looking at Snotlout getting that note, objectively…” He wants to be wrong and it’s not something Astrid is used to, “it looks a little Ryker, doesn’t it? Especially with the fact I keep finding the bodies, it’s like someone knows Snotlout will show up right away.”

“Isn’t that another reason it’s stupid for you restart tours?”

“I told you I’d probably do something stupid if this got worse,” he snorts, “plus, the charming Mr. Grisly has apparently hired Heather as the expert consultant on the case and I just…I know how she’ll twist things, I—someone has to keep putting the truth out there in its full, unglamorous glory.” He scrubs his hand over his tired face, “anyway, what do you think?”

“I don’t see how giving historically accurate Grimborn tours could help anything,” she looks at him, letting her temple lean on his forearm, “but I get that you can’t sit there and do nothing and that’s… commendable.”

“I was actually asking what you thought of the curtains,” he tries to tuck an unruly lock of her bangs behind her ear and her heart stutters at the gentle drag of his fingertips. Her hair doesn’t stay where he put it and the corner of his lips twitches, fascinated and endeared at her expense.

“They’re fine.” She doesn’t look at them, too focused on the way Hiccup’s hand curls around the back of her neck and pulls her in halfway.

He opens his mouth to say something else, but she doesn’t give him the chance, turning partially in the chair to kiss him. He hums against her lips, not shocked this time but content, wound down from the twitchy mess he was earlier. Tired in a way that goes too well with her pajamas and the quiet room, comfortable even as he strokes the side of her neck with his thumb and deepens the kiss.

Despite the unexpected and hectic drama of the last couple of months, Astrid hasn’t regretted anything about her move or even choice of apartment, especially considering that it brought
Hiccup to her. But right now? Right now she wishes she’d put up a far bigger fight about taking the couch, because she wants nothing more than to pull Hiccup closer, but there’s no room.

And they’re alone.

“You are going to have to look at the curtains,” he breaks the kiss just long enough move around the chair and kneel in front of it.

“Sure,” she wraps one heel around the back of his legs, knees on either side of his hips. His shoulders are sharper without his usual layers, his arms flexing under her grip when she guides his hands to her sides, “they look fine.”

“You know, I hate to ask,” his touch is too cautious on her waist as he leans in to kiss the side of her neck, evidently distracted.

“Then don’t,” she pulls at his hair and he pauses, looking at her levelly even as he breathes too hard. “What?”

“You know this chair is approximately where the original apartment front door was,” his hand is on her hip, just under the hem of her shirt, jarringly warm against what he’s saying.

“Oh,” she swallows hard, the creepy note and everything Grimborn in her brain warring with her pounding heart and flushed face. Hiccup’s eyes are a similarly conflicted storm of overthinking emerald green and wide, hectic pupils.

“And I was just shoving my foot in my mouth at Gruff’s, that’s not—I mean your living room should be less drafty with the curtains but—”

“Do you want to move?” She points over her shoulder towards her bedroom and his eyes widen.

“You mean—I,” he clears his throat, hand sliding from under her shirt to a more innocent rest halfway down the outside of her thigh, “like to your bedroom?”

His panic is external and she does her best not to take it personally, letting go of his hips with her knees and rubbing his upper arm, half pat on the back and half awkward urgency to get out of her chair and move it across the room.

“You had a hell of a day, Hiccup, it’s fine—“

“What?” He laughs, scratching the back of his neck as his face turns bright red, nearly matching the new curtains she can see out of the corner of her eye, “no, it was a totally normal—we just don’t know each other very well, this is just a typical day for me. I’m used to um, all the police stations and serial killers and—”

“You don’t have to explain yourself,” she pushes frazzled bangs away from her forehead and tries not to look disappointed or confused or any of the things she’s feeling. Warm, tired, jittery.

“No, I think I do,” he quirks a theatrical eyebrow and she recognizes the smile of a tour guide thrown off base, following a joke back to something like confidence, “because you see, Astrid, I’m not that kind of boy. We haven’t even had our first date yet, how could I expect you to respect me if I put out before the first date?” He slides his hand back up her thigh and under the hem of her shirt, fingertips reaching around trace the notch of her lower spine and make her shiver.

She glares at him, “maybe the first date was just you decorating my apartment.”
“Hey, I don’t make the rules on this one,” he holds his hands up and stands, using her shoulder for balance, “installing curtains is a way better first date for me than frozen yogurt, but this is a societal standard.” He offers her his hand and she accepts help up, ignoring her still wobbly knees. “I can’t just lump a first date in with my occasional handyman duties,” he squeezes her hand before letting go and starting to collect his things.

“Right,” she finally looks at the curtains, sliding the heavy material back and forth, “this is just what would have happened if I’d reported the loud lunatic in the courtyard doing tours to my landlord and asked for some curtains to be installed.”

“I hope not,” he hesitates just a second before kissing her forehead and stepping back with a hopeful, embarrassed expression, “I’m not the only handyman Gobber hires, you know. Probably the most unprofessional, but also—not to toot my own horn or anything—probably the one you most want to see with a plumber crack, so…”

“Is that an offer?” She tries on his method of joking to dispel the slight sting of rejection, even if she understands it. Even if it’s an illusive later instead of a no.

“I didn’t say I wasn’t a tease,” he puts on his jacket and looks around, obviously checking that he collected all his things, “I…it’s late, I’ll get out of your hair.”

“Sure,” she waves him towards the door, fidgeting again with her pajamas. “Thanks for the curtains, I’ll pay you back or—“

“No, don’t,” he runs his hand back through his hair, “I borrowed the money from Snotlout anyway, not that it was a lot of money, and I meant it, it’s a present. Now you don’t have to put up with me quite so much.” He’s hopeful in a way that makes her want to lash out, to take back the closeness that went off track.

“Putting up with you isn’t so bad,” she sighs, “most of the time.”

Hiccup bites his lip, letting it go slowly with those charmingly crooked teeth, and sighing, “I just want you to know how much I’m going to be kicking myself about this for… approximately forever?” He laughs, “really, I just…police station grime and—“

“Why would I buy the cow when I can get the frozen yogurt for free?” She punches him on the shoulder, probably too hard, “I’ll talk to you soon. Before forever.”

“Yeah, I’m going to—“ He points at the door with an awkward hand wave and slips into the hallway before he can say anything else.

Astrid breathes for a second before locking the deadbolt and moving her single chair to the other side of the room. It doesn’t look bad with the curtains.
“That guy over there,” Heather appears over Hiccup’s shoulder at the Ripped Tavern bar, sliding a frothy glass of something his direction, “ordered an IPA and then upon delivery, told me he was really glad we had something that wasn’t hoppy. Do you want it?”

“What do you want Heather?” Hiccup doesn’t look at her or the glass, tipping the brim of his top hat forward to block the glare of the street light through the bar’s front window.

“I’m trying to offer you something free——“

“I’m good.” Hiccup is glad to be honest, after the last week of the largest tours he’s ever given. The seven o’clock is averaging over thirty, nine isn’t much slower at twenty-seven, and there was that landmark eleven o’clock with fifteen people hanging onto his every whisper, miraculously leaving more fulfilled from the truth instead of wild extrapolation.

It doesn’t hurt that sometimes Astrid leaves the curtains open and shouts down help, a glovebox flashlight pointing at the AI. I safe message in a blurry way that means he should buy her a laser pointer with the reassuring stack of cash in his pocket.

“How have things been?” Heather presses onward, elbows on the bar, her pale, stressed face appearing at the edge of his vision. He remembers that expression from the weeks after their Johann discovery, her expression pulled tight like keeping a secret and potentially losing status because of it was physically poisonous to her.

“Since you started expertly advising the police and I took even more of your business?” Hiccup snorts and takes the beer, trying to keep a straight face through a gulp of the bitter fizz, “pretty good, you?”

“I’m glad business is booming,” she manages half a wan smile and Hiccup finally turns to her, face hard.

“What do you want?” He gestures at the promotions board advertising a ‘six-victim’ value pack of sliders to-go to take on tours, “obviously being nice to me isn’t going to get you anywhere.”

“I wasn’t being nice,” she hisses, purely tired now, worry creeping in at the edges, and he can’t help but remember when that danger was fun. When it meant discovery instead of police involvement.

He doesn’t think she gained much from sharing secrets, but they aren’t close enough anymore for him to say it.

“It’s kind of my ground state of existence, but you know the saying, never give away your talents for free.” He takes another gulp of the skunky beer and waits.

It doesn’t take long.
“Did you read the note on the package that was shipped to Snotlout?” Her voice is quiet enough that he’d have to lean in to hear her clearly, but he doesn’t, shrugging a shoulder she can obviously tell his tense.

“Did you know that being deeply disturbed by someone opening a package to find a disembodied foot from a recent murder victim can actually affect your reading comprehension?”

“Hiccup—“

“No, really, I’m eagerly awaiting the results of the study, I’m hoping they can explain some other things. Like a bonus diagnostic evaluation of whatever’s going on up there—“

“Do you want to see it?”

It takes Hiccup a moment to compose his face.

He knows how he does feel, how he should feel, and what he should show and they all fight with facial muscles that haven’t quite learned not to trust her yet.

He’s spent hours on that note. He’s used to missing part of the story, but usually the lacking bits are a hundred plus years old, and not likely possessed by his ex-best friend, the supposed expert on them. He’s frustrated and close and part of him wants to ask Heather as much as she obviously wants to ask him.

If he hadn’t seen it or had the presence of mind to take a picture of it, he’d be near frothing at the mouth for a chance. She doesn’t even have to convince him of the Grimborn connection, it’s in the open now, not only on the police radar but contributing to the bearing of the investigation. Plus, his connection to the victims would—does—make him thrilled for a chance to exonerate himself.

But he’d have to keep that secret from her, to make her pry it out of him, even though if she succeeded he’d only look guiltier. As it stands, it’s best not to let her try.

“I think it looks better for my case if I haven’t, don’t you?” He sips the beer again, practicing his straight face around a mouthful he can’t quite taste through the soured friendship in the air. “Plus, you’re the police expert.”

“Come on, you can’t tell me you’re hung up on the expert thing, are you?” She laughs and it’s fake, the way she used to laugh at Snotlout’s stories he’s told a thousand times when she wanted him to move on. “It’s not like they could hire you, it’d look like nepotism.”

She avoids the conflict of interest when it suits her.

“Snotlout isn’t actually my domestic partner, you know that.”

Heather purses her lips and sighs, scratching her head and taking too long to tuck hair behind her ear. Classic Berserker pre-politeness behavior.

“Ok, I’m…stumped. Is there any way you could look at it with me.” She reads his unflinching face and gets even smaller, “for me.”

Hiccup purposefully slurps the beer as loud as he can and the woman sitting next to him shifts one bar stool down.

“Please,” Heather grits between her teeth and Hiccup stands up.
“I’ve actually got a nine o’clock tour to amass right now, and I’m pretty booked up for the next… forever ensuring that nothing impacts the way I perceive un-sensationalized truths,” he talks at her like she’s a stubborn tourist asking again and again about murders a century too recent to be ready for curiosity to be welcome amidst their tragedy. “But maybe after that sometime. Have Dagur put this on my tab,” he slides the half a beer back towards her.

“You don’t have a tab,” Heather sighs, miserably at the same time as Dagur calls out from the other end of the bar.

“Got it, Brother!”

Hiccup waves in thanks and turns away from the bar, adjusting his messenger bag over his shoulder. There’s a small group starting to mill around his usual table and he can’t help but note their glove-less hands and lament clammy fingers on his still un-laminated copy of the Al. I safe picture. He hasn’t had time to go back by the archives, what with trying to analyze the foot-note and three frankly exhausting tours a night.

When he first spots blonde out of the corner of his eye, he assumes it’s the fact that thinking about the archives and the picture naturally makes him think of Astrid, but a double take finds Ruffnut leaning on her elbows across the table. He only has a few minutes before gathering his next tour group, but he heads that way anyway, not so subtly hoping that Heather is watching.

Snotlout’s wrong, Heather was never anything more than his friend and research partner, but that doesn’t mean he can’t so quietly announce that he can make more friends whenever he feels like it.

“Hey guys,” he slides into the chair between them at the table for four, folding his hands in front of him, “what’s up?”

They’re both absolutely silent for a moment until Ruffnut waves, eyebrows raised.

“Hi,” Astrid’s voice is uncharacteristically quiet, “I thought—I mean, don’t you have a tour?”

He checks the time, “in a couple minutes, I’ve got time to say hi though.”

Astrid’s smile is tight lipped and embarrassed, but earnest, and he frowns.

“Is everything ok?”

“Not really,” Ruffnut cuts in, leaning her pointy chin on her palm and narrowing dangerous eyes.

“Oh?” Hiccup’s hand itches to reach for Astrid’s knee under the table but he’s utterly unsure whether that’s allowed and he keeps his fingers folded tight together.

“My toilet’s leaking,” Ruffnut’s grin spreads slowly, “I heard if you fix it for me though, there’s a bonus ass show.”

Hiccup’s face freezes, undoubtedly turning blue as his blood runs cold.

“You guys are talking about the other night,” he swallows, glancing wide-eyed at Astrid, whose blush is extending under her bangs. “And I interrupted.”

“It’s fine—“ Astrid puts her nervous hand on his and he feels stupid all over again.

He doesn’t know how to explain that she’s not something that happens to him often. How he
doesn’t even want to hope because this all seems so impossible, in flux with so much awful and so outside his luck and circumstance that he doesn’t know what to do about it. And how he wants to do everything about it but not in the same shirt he had on when he was at the police station to explain his involvement with a murder victim’s severed foot.

“Yeah, it’s just that Astrid isn’t really used to rejection,” Ruffnut waves casually, “I mean look at her.”

Hiccup swallows hard, “I have.”

“It’s fine—” Astrid placates, glaring at Ruffnut, who’s still grinning like she just set off a firework she’s been looking forward to for months.

“No, it’s not—It wasn’t a rejection, I just smelled like police station and probably dead foot—”

“It was a rough day, I get it—”

“And I meant it when I said I’d be kicking myself, I have been, with both feet—”

“You really don’t have to,” she glares at Ruffnut, but it has little to no impact, “I’m sorry you had to witness me learning my lesson about telling Ruffnut anything at all, ever.”

“Don’t apologize—” Hiccup holds his hands up in surrender or to hide his bright red face. There’s no way it looks as cute as the flush across the bridge of Astrid’s nose. He’s definitely sweating under the hat and lamenting Berk’s Victorian Era Craftsmen’s obsession with wool.

“Like you’ll ever stop telling me things,” Ruffnut shakes her head, “who else can you go to for excellent advice?”

“Literally anyone else,” Astrid snaps, eyes darting back and forth between Hiccup and the person she until recently called her friend.

“Do you want to know the advice?” Ruffnut raises an eyebrow, evil grin widening.

“Ruffnut,” Astrid growls and there’s something cornered about it that piques Hiccup’s curiosity even through his deep and abiding embarrassment. “Do not—”

“I’m talking to Hiccup.” She rolls her eyes, “so do you want to hear the advice?”

“Excuse me,” someone taps on Hiccup’s shoulder and he whirls around to see a woman wearing a freshly bought, still wrinkled Grimborn shirt like the ones hanging from the rafters, “are you in charge of the walk-on nine o’clock Viggo Grimborn tour?”

“Yes, I’ll be over there in just a minute—”

“The website said the tour meets at nine o’clock and it’s three minutes after,” the woman taps her watch and Hiccup sighs.

“Just give me a minute—”

“You know I was so disappointed when I saw Berserker tours booked out two months, they have all the best reviews, but I found your tour rated almost as well on Trip Advisor and thought I’d take a shot,” she purses her lips like the kind of person who reads tabloids to judge the caliber of the journalism, “no one said anything about tardiness—”

“It’s fine, Hiccup,” Astrid pats his knee under the table, fingers light and fleeting but present
enough to send a thrill up his spine, even through the embarrassment and irritation at the interruption.

“Are you giving The Real Viggo Grimborn tour?” An older teenage boy appears on Hiccup’s other side, pointing at Hiccup’s website on his phone. “It said on the website you’d be in ‘period wear’, is that what the hat is? Is the tour just about the old murders or are you going to talk about the new ones too?”

“Go,” Astrid sighs, “your audience awaits.”

“They can await another minute,” Hiccup glares at the first woman who starts reading aloud as she types an unflattering review.

“I know Berserker tours is talking about the new murders,” a second boy nudges his friend and looks at Heather admiringly, “we could still see if we could get on their tour tomorrow.”

“They’re booked out for months,” the first boy shoves his phone closer to Hiccup’s face, “this is you, right?”

“Fine!” Hiccup stands up and Astrid’s hand falling away from his leg leaving a cold spot even through the too thick material of his old coat, “the nine o’clock Grimborn tour is leaving now, if you want to be on it, come give me money on the way out the side door.”

“Review update pending tour conclusion,” the woman says imperiously as she puts her phone away and Hiccup allows himself one last glance at Astrid as he puts his tour guide persona into place.

She’s not looking at him and it serves as a timely reminder that even deserved rejection stings.

It’s Hiccup’s biggest tour group ever and he talks faster because of it, dodging questions about recent murder victims and trying to lure the group back in time with his most scandalous Grimborn era stories.

Sometimes reversing a bad review on Trip Advisor means staring someone his mother’s age in the face and explaining an example pay scale of a Victorian Berkian prostitute by sex act, and at some point, he became ok with that.

“And now, if you aren’t already glad for The Real Grimborn Tour’s full dark, nine o’clock tour option that is not offered by Berserker tours,” he whispers reverently in front of the wall outside of Astrid’s apartment, “you will be now, as I have the only picture of a message accepted by experts to have been written by the one and only Viggo Grimborn, on this very well.”

“Are you talking about the ‘All Safe’ message?” A man in the back asks too loud and Hiccup waits a beat for Astrid to announce herself and correct him.

She doesn’t.

Hiccup knows she’s probably still out with Ruffnut, likely discussing one of the most spasmodically regrettable moments of his life, but her pulled shut curtains still tug crooked at his chest, like a possibility falling off of a ledge in slow motion.

“Wasn’t that erased by rain?” Another man asks, thankfully on topic, and Hiccup digs through his bag for the picture.

“Not before a lucky photographer with the Berk Enquirer got a shot of it,” he hands it to the front
row, who mostly pass it on without looking, whispering to each other about future murders in excited voices Hiccup pretends not to hear, “it was recently found by a friend who was generous enough to make me a copy of it. I’ll let you look at it on the way to site two, if you’ll follow me…”

Her windows are closed for the eleven o’clock too. They usually are, but Hiccup reads more into it than he should, pausing a little too long and explaining the layout of the building a hundred years ago to a crowd more scared of shadows flickering in real time than ghosts.

Hiccup used to come home from tours energized, ready to do his own research or explore the city without a following, but the last week has been beyond draining. Almost desk job level, he’d guess, and he deflates as soon as he makes it through the front door, tossing his hat at its hook and missing.

He could leave it on the floor. It’s not like there’s anything inherently damaging to a hat about being on the floor and bending over to pick it up sounds like a lot of work.

The pull chain of the lamp startles him and he jumps at the light flashing on to reveal Snotlout, shirtless in his dad’s chair, features thrown into ominous shadow by the angled light.

“Fuck,” Hiccup claps his hand over his heart, “I get that you’re saving power by leaving the overhead light off, but the dramatic lamp pull is a little over the top, don’t you think?”

“I talked to Ruffnut,” Snotlout says calmly, a few shades off of his cop voice, and Hiccup frowns as he hangs up his jacket.

“Oh yeah? How’s that going?” He doesn’t mention that he also talked to Ruffnut, as he’s had a long enough day as is, even without being reminded that he didn’t get a chance to hear her advice.

“Can you tell me about the events of last Saturday?” Snotlout leans forward, elbows on his knees, and Hiccup recognizes his interrogation stance number three from the time he had Hiccup asses which out of five interrogation stances was the most intimidating.

Three won.

“You mean the time you had a foot mailed to you?” Hiccup bites his tongue against adding the whole part about his suspicions that some crazy is trying to frame Snotlout. It’s like the note, the less they know, the safer they are. “What part do you need a refresher on?”

“The part where after you borrowed money from me, you went and bought curtains, which you then installed at Astrid’s apartment,” Snotlout smacks his hands on his knees in a less threatening rendition of Detective Eretson’s display of strength. Although maybe the lack of threat can be attributed to his Batman pajama pants. “Where my sources tell me that you made out with her and she invited you to her bedroom, but you declined the offer. Does any of that sound familiar to you?”

Hiccup judges the distance to his bedroom door. Usually, he can make it before Snotlout tackles him, but the abrupt restarting of tours along with avoiding his usual shortcuts has left his back creaky and vulnerable. A tackle isn’t worth risking.

“By your source, you mean Ruffnut?”

“I’m asking the questions here, Hiccup,” Snotlout points at the couch, “why don’t you have a seat?”
“Have you been working on your Eretson impression?” Hiccup perches on the edge of the couch, avoiding eye contact. “It’s not bad—”

“First of all, he’s been working on his me impression, and it’s awful. Second, what the fuck are you doing trying to mess it up with Astrid on purpose?”

“I’m not,” Hiccup shakes his head, “that’s—”

“You know you’ve hung out with some real duds, right? There was the girl you met at the homeless shelter who kept on arguing with me about police brutality at like seven in the morning. There was Heather, there was that month you kept bringing home girls from tours until—”

“Let’s not talk about that right now,” Hiccup runs his hand through his hair and swears he can smell the anxiety pouring off of him, “and stop with the Heather thing. And Olivia worked at a homeless shelter, she saw a different side of the force than you do—”

“No, you aren’t derailing this conversation. You know I got Raymond fired for that shit last year, and Astrid is really fucking hot. Like I don’t know why she’s talking to you hot. Plus she’s a fucking nerd, but I can still talk to her, and she’s Ruffnut’s friend. You aren’t just messing this up for yourself, you’re messing it up for both of us.” Snotlout points a stern finger at him, “so before you fuck it up entirely, tell me honestly what the hell was going through your head when you decided not to sleep with her.”

“Well,” Hiccup tugs at his collar, staring down at his shoes, “I’m sure you’ll understand this, we woke up a little after four that day and I was at her house around eleven, so if I’d gone to sleep then it would have been equivalent to someone with a daytime schedule going to sleep at around four or five. And given I was on the cusp of restarting tours, that would have really messed with my sleep schedule—ouch!”

Snotlout’s phone bounces off of Hiccup’s forehead and lands on the floor.

“Cut the shit, Haddock.”

“I can’t remember my thought process,” Hiccup glares, rubbing his head, “not since some officer brutally knocked it out of me—”

“You had a date with her, which means you obviously like her and how could you not because I swear dude, the hottest nerd I’ve ever—”

“Yes, she’s really hot, I get it,” he stands up and starts pacing, hands folded behind his back where it pangs with every step, “I know, I rejected the hot—but it’s more than that, she’s so—she’s determined and adorable and smart—so fucking smart, I can’t slip anything by her and—”

“You’re practically puking heart emojis right now,” Snotlout shakes his head, “And you know what? She sounded really fucking worried about you when Grisly came by her work and she went on your creepy private tour when she barely even knew you—”

“I know!” Hiccup yanks at his hair, “I know all of that, I don’t—”

“And then after the creepiest fucking day, she made out with you and invited you back to her bedroom and you said no,” Snotlout folds his hands over his knee, poised to put the clues together in a neat package and deliver his final verdict, “which means that you chose to keep thinking about a murder victim’s feet instead of seeing Astrid naked.”

“I don’t think I’d summarize it quite like that,” Hiccup stares hard at Snotlout to avoid thinking of
either in the same moment.

“Well, I would, because it leads pretty neatly to two possible solutions,” he numbers on his fingers, “one, you’re a creepier fucker than I ever imagined—”

“Hey!”

“Or two, you’re out of your league here and need my help. And if it’s two, and I hope it’s two because I hate apartment shopping—”

“You’ve never lived anywhere but your parents’ house or here—”

“Because I hate apartment shopping so much,” Snotlout rolls his eyes, “duh. Anyway, I think you should give me your phone so I can text her and fix this.”

“No,” Hiccup checks his pocket to make sure his phone is still there and that it hasn’t magically poofed into Snotlout’s pocket. “I know those odds.”

“Yes, you know that four out of the five times you let me text girls for you, you got laid.” Snotlout holds his hand out, “and she already wanted to bang you, so this one will be easy.”

“And the fifth time I got punched in the face,” Hiccup rubs his cheek at the memory, “I’m not letting you—it’s too important, ok? She’s too important. I already like her too much, that’s—it’s not just some girl I swiped right on or met at Gruff’s, it’s…she’s too important for police station grime and—”

“I’m sure she has a shower,” he scoffs.

“Yeah, I’m sure that’s the way to Astrid’s heart,” Hiccup gesticulates, “I should have just asked to take a shower to wash off the eau de dead guy foot—”

“Oh my god!” Snotlout jumps up, jabbing a finger too hard into Hiccup’s chest and refusing to remove it even when Hiccup smacks his hand. “You’re doing it again.”

“Doing what again?”

“That thing where one bad thing happens so no good things can happen ever,” he shouts, throwing his arms up, and Hiccup rubs his chest, checking for a permanent indent.

“I don’t do that.”

“You do, you so do.” Snotlout picks his phone up and starts typing something, “any normal person gets mailed a dead foot and they make a booty call to clear their mind. Not you, though, you turn down Astrid, the hottest girl who’s ever talked to you, in order to make your life all about creepy tours again—”

“You aren’t texting her, are you?” He tries to grab Snotlout’s phone but gets a shoulder to the chest for his effort.

“No, I’m not, not that it’s any of your business,” he puts his phone in his pocket and shoves Hiccup’s shoulder a little harder than is probably explicitly necessary, “stop it, ok? Talk to her, apologize for being a spaz, tell her all that mushy shit you just told me and invite her to sit on your f—”

“Gah!” Hiccup claps his hands over his ears and Snotlout pries them off again, smushing Hiccup’s
cheeks so that he can’t talk.

“When I let go, you’re going to say ‘yes, Snotlout, thanks for the genius advice, I’ll do exactly that’, ok?”

Hiccup nods to get his face back and rubs his jaw when Snotlout lets go, “you know I can’t take a lecture seriously when you’re shirtless.”

“Too bad, my tan is setting,” he looks down at his chest, “now what were you going to say?”

He has gotten too far without being tackled to give up that streak now.

“Thanks for the advice.”

“Genius advice.”

“Advice,” Hiccup pats him on the head, narrowly dodging having his arm twisted behind his back as he races to his dad’s old office and locks the door behind him. Snotlout pounds on it a couple of times before giving up and the familiar sounds of setting up a video game drift through the thick wood.

Hiccup never used to drink before work. It was a point of pride, a testament to taking tours and correct dispersal of Viggo Grimborn knowledge seriously.

Well, that and he couldn’t afford Ripped Tavern prices for a while when he first went out on his own, but that’s neither here nor there because it became a principle thing.

And like all principles, it had its crumbling point, which was apparently the day after Snotlout’s lecture when he woke up to fifteen questions about the copycat killer and one bland apology text from Astrid with a period at the end.

Snotlout suggested breakfast happy hour at Gruff’s, given that it’s his day off, and Hiccup was stunned enough at the invitation in the wake of his head-patting that he went along without much fuss. The bar is packed when they get there and Gruffnut makes sure to flip off Snotlout before disappearing into the back room.

“Remember how good the service used to be before he knew what your job was?” Hiccup starts to sit at a barstool but Snotlout grabs his elbow, pulling him over to a dirty table by the wall and swiping balled-up napkins onto the floor. “Why the table?”

“I want wings.”

“Last time you got wings I had to use the bathroom at the sandwich shop across the street because you wouldn’t leave the toilet,” Hiccup snorts, ignoring Snotlout’s glare.

“That was one time.”

“Well, it was twice because it happened over a period of like five hours but—”

Snotlout kicks him hard under the table at the same time as he waves at the door, “over here!”

“Who?” Hiccup’s question dies in his throat when he looks over his shoulder and sees Astrid, reluctant and stumbling after Ruffnut, who has an irrefutable grip on her arm. “You invited them?”
“I invited Ruffnut, who said she was already hanging out with Astrid today, so I said it’d just have
to be your lucky day,” Snotlout scoots further into the booth to make room for Ruffnut to plop next
to him. “We haven’t ordered yet, Gruff is taking forever.”

“Sounds like him,” Ruffnut scoffs.

Astrid hesitates a second before sitting down, but when she does she turns towards him halfway,
her knee bumping his, “for the record, I was not in on this setup.”

“I couldn’t tell from the way you were enthusiastically kicking and screaming to get away from
Ruffnut.” Hiccup tries to let himself smile, shoving Snotlout’s advice far to the back of his mind.
They were doing fine, he was doing fine. She likes him.

Or liked. Maybe he messed that up.

No, not the time to think about that. He’s never been good at playing dumb but he’s getting
enough practice lately that maybe he’s due for some forward strides.

“That’s why I made sure to verbally confirm,” she scoots a little closer when someone walking by
jostles her shoulder and her leg is warm against his, “not in on the plan. I was personally waiting
for frozen yogurt.”

“Shit, I meant to text you to reschedule that,” Hiccup scratches the back of his neck, “I’ve just—”

“Been busy,” she flushes slightly, “I could see that yesterday.”

Yesterday, at the Ripped Tavern, where she was telling Ruffnut all about how he rejected her.
That yesterday. Of course.

“Tours are booming,” he laughs, gesturing in the vague direction of the second murder site and
trying not to think of the fact he gets more and more nervous every time he approaches it. “But
that shouldn’t get in the way of getting some vaguely sour and crappy excuse for ice cream with
you.”

“Where the hell is Gruff?” Snotlout huffs.

“I’ll go look for him,” Ruffnut stands up, “he’s probably smoking out back or something else
useless.”

“Do you want me to come with you?” Astrid offers but Snotlout stands up first.

“I’ve got it, you two just…talk,” he looks significantly at Hiccup like the exact opposite of an
anxious father chaperoning prom before following Ruffnut towards the back door.

“Subtle,” Hiccup grumbles, wishing he had something to do with his hands as Astrid fidgets, biting
her lip in the growing awkward silence.

“I’ve been thinking,” she says in a low voice, a cautious voice, and Hiccup nods, waiting for the
bomb to drop. “That note you showed me, there’s something—”

“Wait, you mean…” He leans in a little closer, dropping his voice, “you’re talking about the um…
murder foot note, right?”

“The ‘all right’ at the beginning, I think it’s about D—the second victim,” she tries to stay neutral,
but her voice wavers and Hiccup sets an arm over her shoulders, comfortable like it’s more than
just the start of a habit, “he was missing his left leg, right? Like you?”

She brings his foot up casually, curious but not in the way that makes him cringe and he nods slowly.

“Yeah, that’s why I could give him my old one.”

“That’s why it’s misspelled, or it’s not misspelled, it’s a description. Which makes me wonder if a hint about the next victim is in the message,” she’s not excited at the prospect, it’s quieter than that, like she knows she’s brilliant and is hoping he’ll keep up with her. “What do you think?”

“I think that I can’t believe you want to talk about that morbid note with me.” He doesn’t have anything smarter to say as his hand curls easily around her upper arm.

“Well, I don’t know who else I’d talk about it with,” she backhands him on the stomach, obviously meaning to be gentle but thudding hard anyway, “plus, I told you, I like talking about…this stuff with you.”

She avoids Grimborn because it isn’t, it’s modern and ongoing and in the way of all the ways he wants to appreciate her right now.

“You’re…impossible,” he shakes his head, exhaling carefully like too much breeze could blur the lines of her improbable perfection.

“Impossible,” she doesn’t quite ask and her expression falls, her back going rigid against his arm. “You probably don’t want to talk about it.”

“No, no, I—the good kind of impossible,” he nods, sincere, “I’m just not used to anyone taking an interest in this kind of thing, I guess, especially not after I was such a spaz the other night.”

“You didn’t really give me a choice not to take an interest,” she softens slightly, “you’re pretty convincing when you put your mind to it.”

“Convincing, huh?” He laughs, “Snotlout’s word for it is usually creepy. Or obsessive or annoying, depends on the day.”

“Those too,” she teases, elbow against his side, “any luck?”

“Hmm?” He doesn’t realize he’s leaning closer until his nose is almost against her cheek and she’s clearly talking to Snotlout and Ruffnut, who are standing at the edge of the table.

“No sign of him,” Ruffnut shrugs, “you guys want to go somewhere else?”

“With you two?” Astrid raises an eyebrow and Hiccup still struggles to fathom the idea that she might want to be alone with him. Again. Even if it’s to look at the note more, that’s…amazing.

No, impossible. He used the right word to begin with.

“Sure,” Snotlout points at the door, “let’s leave though, if I’m here any longer I’m going to have to start telling people that taking bottles over the bar is stealing, and I don’t want to help Gruff out like that.”

“How long do you have before your tour?” Astrid asks as she climbs out of the booth and Hiccup’s heart drops when he checks the time.

“An hour.”
“That’s enough time for frozen yogurt,” her nose wrinkles when she squints at the too bright street light when she follows Ruffnut outside and down the sidewalk. “And we could talk…” The note is implied and Hiccup shrugs too hard, nodding at the same time and enthusiastically risking the muscles in his neck because of it.

“Yeah, sure, that’s—cool.”

“Looks like you guys are planning something mushy,” Snotlout says pointedly, reminding Hiccup of his excellent advice at absolutely the wrong time. “We’ll just go back to the apartment.”

Ruffnut seems to agree to that, grinning and whispering something Hiccup doesn’t try to hear into Snotlout’s ear. He laughs and the sound echoes, the density of the alleys carrying it between old bricks like a secret, low tech game of telephone that turns happy sounds to groans that haunt empty corners.

“There’s a shortcut up ahead,” Hiccup gestures at the sign-less gate just ahead, remembering her moonlit suspicious face when she decided to trust him for the first time. “You might recognize it.”

“Recognize what?” Ruffnut turns back to tell Astrid something and pauses, staring down the alley, her mouth slowly falling open.

“What is it?” Astrid asks, looking the same direction with a squint that gives way to wide eyes as she grabs Hiccup’s arm, grip tight like she’s holding herself up on him.

It takes Hiccup a second to recognize what he sees. A second more than it should, given that the sight should be triply familiar by now, not counting the photographs etched in his memory.

Behind the condo, right where Catherine Whittaker’s body was found on a cold morning in eighteen eighty-three, there’s a mostly shadowed shape. It’s a sprawling, nebulous shape, parts of it struggling to escape its gravitational field, strewn across the alley floor like satellite debris from a hundred failed launches.

At the edge of it, the circle of the streetlight catches a handful of blonde dreadlocks, stained with red.

“No!” Ruffnut wails, tears flash flooding her cheeks as she launches herself at the gate. “No! No, no, no!”

“Shit,” Snotlout catches her, barely, struggling once again to keep his grip through her flailing, this time sobbing instead of yelling. “Another fucking—who’s calling it in?”

“I’ve got it,” Astrid says in a small voice, muttering under her breath as she dials three digits. “It has to be Gruffnut, it has to be Gruffnut.”
Astrid was assigned a single roommate freshman year, but she really ended up with two. Tuffnut was just always around. At first he was just a nuisance and unexpected ally in her newly acquired role of getting Ruffnut to class, but that task practically battle hardened their friendship.

Astrid (6:15pm): hey Tuff, another murder happened, your sister is freaking out, we’re at the police station
Astrid (6:16pm): call me
Astrid (6:17pm): come on tuff pick up your phone
Astrid (6:18pm): pick up pick up pick up

“Goddammit,” Astrid nearly throws her phone across the police station lobby when Tuffnut’s phone goes to voicemail for what must be the twentieth time. If she hears ‘you’ve reached Tuffnut, the boy twin, and unless you’re my mom just text me’ one more time, she’s going to scream.

“I wonder if his phone is ringing in some back room or police van,” Ruffnut hugs her knees on one of the uncomfortable plastic chairs, her eyes fixed on the wall in a vacant, thousand-yard stare.

“It really looked like Gruffnut,” Hiccup says gently, hand hovering over her shoulder like he’s scared to touch her. Snotlout seems to have made the same assessment, leaning on his desk a few yards away instead of lurking in the lobby like the rest of them.

“You don’t know my brother,” Ruffnut shakes her head, “they look—people look different when they’re dead, anyway, but it could be…I saw…”

“Hey, I’m calling him, ok?” Astrid tries to sound gentle even as the panicked bubble in her throat expands. Tuffnut. Tuffnut who drove two hours out of his way to pick her up from that disastrous last Thanksgiving at her uncle’s.

Tuffnut’s eyes half lidded and empty, skin ashy on an alley floor, demolished in a way no one ever should be.

“If he doesn’t pick up soon, I’ll get someone to do a home check,” Snotlout offers, arms crossed and foot tapping, irritated at being on this side of the action. Astrid remembers him offering to check her apartment for murderers after Hiccup’s tour…ended prematurely and she doesn’t doubt that if he didn’t have to give his own statement, he’d be tracking Tuffnut down. She doesn’t quite have room to appreciate that right now, but she thinks she will later.

“I swear, I bet his phone is just ringing and ringing and ringing—”

“You know what? No, I’ll go check evidence,” Snotlout kicks off of the side of his desk, “I’ll be right back.”

“You’re not in uniform,” Hiccup calls the reminder after him but gets no response. “Really, Ruffnut, it was Gruff—”

“You don’t know my brother!” Ruffnut snaps and Eretson gives Astrid a worried look through the window next to his office door before waving to her.

“What’s going on out there?” He asks quietly when she has the door cracked an inch and Astrid sighs, glancing at Ruffnut before slipping entirely into the office.
“The victim looks a lot like her brother,” she swallows back the tremor in her own voice, “and he’s not picking up his phone.”

“We’re working as fast as we can on ID,” Eretson rubs his temple. The fact that speedy identification will lead into looking for connections with other victims remains unspoken and Astrid has to bite her tongue to stop from blurting out that she’s seen the note.

She’s used to looking through closed cases and seeing strings that could have been tied up sooner. She’s not used to being the string. Being a loose end fits her about as well as inaction.

“Can I step outside to keep calling him?” Even just mentioning outside makes the police station air feel oppressive and heavy, like it doesn’t get all the way into her lungs before she’s forced to gulp down another unsatisfying breath. “I won’t go anywhere, I just—”

“Fine,” Eretson waves her off with the kind of pitying dismissal that means he clearly doesn’t think she knows anything. If she weren’t so preoccupied, she might tell him otherwise, but as is she’s glad for something more pertinent to do.

Back in the lobby, Snotlout is kneeling in front of Ruffnut’s chair, one gloved hand holding a wallet open.

“See? Gruffnut Thorston, with a G, it’s not your brother. Look at the picture, clearly Gruffnut,” he points at it with his other hand and Ruffnut goes paler.

“That won’t work,” Astrid hopes she sounds more assuring than she feels, “they’ve switched ID’s before.”

“Fine, what else can I get from evidence to convince her?” Snotlout stands back up and his gloved hand gains new significance.

“Wait, you actually went and grabbed that from evidence?” She looks at Hiccup for confirmation and he shrugs, washing his hands of the problem.

“Duh.”

“Go put it back,” she snaps, the air heavy like guilt trying to cement itself in her chest.

“As the police officer of the friendgroup—“

“Friendgroup?” Hiccup snorts, arms crossed, right heel tapping. The shoulder he has turned towards her is awkward and cold and she scowls.

“Yes, as the only officer out here, I think I know what I’m allowed to get from evidence.”

Eretson’s door cracks open and he peeks his head out, “you got something from evidence?”

“N—“

“Put it back.” The detective looks purposefully at Astrid and she heads towards the door with a nod.

“I’m going to keep trying Tuff outside.”

The breeze helps until she gets Tuffnut’s voicemail again. And again. Every time the recording mentions his mom, she thinks of Mrs. Thorston and her collection of ceramic figurines padlocked in a safe whenever her kids are home. Mrs. Thorston with her tired smile, always offering Astrid a
place over the holidays.

She’s halfway through another text, this one openly threatening what exactly what she’ll do to him if he doesn’t get off his ass and answer his fucking phone, when a familiar creaky car pulls into the parking lot and stops between two out of service cruisers. When Tuffnut climbs out of the driver’s seat, concerned and wearing the band tee-shirt he doesn’t even let Ruffnut borrow, Astrid launches herself at him.

“Why the hell weren’t you answering?” She shoves his shoulders and he stumbles back, hands raised.

“Whoa, Astrid—”

“I must have heard your stupid voicemail message a thousand times by now, why didn’t you pick up? Or answer any of my texts?” She pushes him again but with less gusto, voice shaking like her hands.

“I got in the car as soon as you said my sister was freaking out at the police station,” his hands are still up and it makes her want to shove him again, just to make sure he’s real. “And as you know, it’s not safe to be on the phone while operating a motor vehicle—”

She hugs him hard enough that it’s practically a shove, and he yelps.

“Oh god, Astrid attack! Where does it hurt? Am I hurt?” He flails until his hands land very gently on her shoulders, “oh. Wait. It’s affection.” He hugs her back, resting his cheek on her head as she hides sudden tears in his shoulder, “I like it.”

“Idiot,” she sniffs, trying to calm her fluttering pulse.

“Quick question, As, is that snot or tears on my neck right now?”

“A bit of both,” she sighs, pulling back and wiping her face on her sleeve. “Sorry.”

“No problem-o,” he awkwardly pats her shoulders before rubbing his hands together, “so, my sister is freaking out? And considering you just cried all over me like a girl, I’m getting that the threshold for a so-called freak-out is different than usual.”

“Um, just…before we go in,” Astrid winces, “the murder, this time, it’s…well, now I’m pretty sure it’s Gruffnut.”

“What?” He blanches, “Gruffnut can’t die. I know he can’t, he told me when I was nine that he’s immortal, it has to be someone else—”

“Tuff,” she cuts him off, “trust me, it was either Gruffnut or well…you, and Ruffnut thinks it’s you right now.”

“Fuck,” he sighs, “I cry when I see deer at the side of the road because they remind me of my sister. Those long legs…” he sniffs, “where is she?”

“Inside,” Astrid nods at Eretson on the way into the waiting room then joins Hiccup where he’s migrated to lean against Snotlout’s desk.

“Oh my god,” Hiccup wrinkles his nose, mouth gaping open slightly as he watches Tuffnut kneel in front of Ruffnut and grab her face, “that’s…Gruff.”
“Shh,” she glares at him as much as she can through eyes she’s pretending aren’t teary, “it’s definitely Tuff.”

“How can you be sure?” Hiccup whispers, “you said they looked alike but…”

“It’s Tuff,” she nods, exhaling deep breath that seems to take some of her shakiness with it.

“When is our birthday?” Ruffnut asks carefully, staring her brother deep in the eyes like she’s trying to root out a rat.

“Bold of you to assume I was born.”

“Definitely Tuff,” Astrid’s laugh is brittle, and Hiccup reaches halfway towards her face but then decides against it. “What?”

“You have a little, umm,” he scratches the back of his neck and points to his cheek, “on your—”

“Oh,” she wipes her face and comes away with a streak of snot. Great. “I—he’s a friend, I was worried too. I was trying to keep it together for Ruff, but seeing him—”

“No, it’s—that makes sense, it’s an emotional…situation,” he nods, and she’s shocked by how comfortable she is under the weight of his concern. Her assurance that she’s absolutely fine and there’s no reason for him to worry dies in her throat and she nods quietly.

He gets it. He gets it more than anyone else she can think of.

“Yeah.” She tucks her hair behind her ear and hugs her middle, letting herself lean a little sideways against his shoulder as she watches the twins.

“What color was your cast in second grade when you broke your wrist?” Ruffnut continues her interrogation, holding Tuffnut’s hand as he gets off of the floor to sit in the chair next to her.

“Green like the tree I fell out of, until you colored it brown when all the leaves fell off, then I had to wear a gross green cast covered in brown sharpie that no one could even sign for like a month.”

“Holy shit,” Snotlout walks out from the hallway and freezes, looking between Tuffnut and Hiccup. “That’s—”

“It’s not Gruff,” Astrid doesn’t let him finish.

“And I thought you were stupid for loaning money to the wrong dude,” Snotlout shakes his head, looking Tuffnut up and down.

“We were stupid,” Ruffnut sighs, color coming back to her face even as her knuckles stay white and gripped tight around her brother’s hand, “that’s a thousand dollars I’m never getting back now.”

“Maybe Gruffnut willed us the treasure,” Tuffnut shrugs, “you know, the one he buried in our backyard as kids? The one we could never find?”

“There’s no treasure, Tuff,” Ruffnut sniffs, her voice cloudy with reluctant, happy tears, “idiot.”

“Forensics is an hour out on another case,” Eretson stops short in his office door, blinking at Tuffnut with a flicker of something other than his usual boredom. Not quite fascination, but leaning in that direction, “that’s my victim.” He looks at Astrid for corroboration and she shrugs.
“No it’s not, Eretson, use your eyes, this guy is clearly alive, while the victim is clearly dead,” Snotlout goes on tip toes against the wall, “do you need me to do the rest of your job for you?”

“Ruffnut’s brother is the victim’s cousin.” Astrid glares at Snotlout, trying to remind him that it’s probably not the time to harass the detective investigating the body they just happened to find. “Presumably, I know you don’t have ID yet but the family resemblance is—”

“Significant,” Eretson agrees, nodding slowly.

“Yes, Mr. Officer, sir,” Tuffnut cups his hand to his mouth like he’s telling the whole room except Ruffnut a secret, “are you sure that my cousin is dead? I have reason to believe that’s not actually possible—”

“Super dead, dude,” Snotlout answers and Eretson glares at him, “what? I’m an officer too, I can’t answer the question?”

“I’ll take your statement first, Jorgenson,” Eretson points at his office, “that way you can get out of here and enjoy your day off.”

“I was going to ask my actual boss if he needs me to come in—”

“He does not,” a hair-raising, accented voice chimes from the mouth of the hallway and Mr. Grisly walks into the room, footfalls crisp and measured, like an actor walking to a specific marker on a stage.

“Like I said, I’m going to ask my actual boss, who is neither of you—”

“Your boss takes my recommendations and I can assure you that I’ll recommend the absolute truth, which is that we are not in need of your…” Grisly looks Snotlout up and down cold eyes lingering on his tip toes, “help.”

“Statement, Jorgenson,” Eretson gestures back at his office, his posture stiff and faced wholly towards Mr. Grisly, the line of his shoulders an impromptu fortification against an oncoming threat, “now.”

“Fine,” Snotlout growls, shouldering Eretson on his way into the office and grumbling under his breath when the other man doesn’t appear to notice. Eretson stares at Grisly for another second before reluctantly retreating and as soon as the door is shut, Grisly laughs. There’s nothing amused about the sound. It’s brittle, like dead leaves in drafty corners, musty like breeze from a basement that should have been forgotten.

“A matched set,” he gestures at Tuffnut with a long, waxy hand.

“There might be something sexy in the coffee at this police station, but twin stuff is creepy, pal,” Ruffnut holds her brother’s hand tighter and Grisly chuckles.

“I meant that your brother looks like the victim on the slab in back,” Grisly shrugs, hands folded behind his back, “parts of the resemblance are up to my imagination to fill in, of course…”

Ruffnut blanches, obviously remembering the scene in the alley and Hiccup bristles, his sudden protectiveness more inspiring than insulting.

“Good to know that your imagination has such involvement in this case,” he stands up from Snotlout’s desk, back rigid, and Astrid can see how he felt like a safe harbor in an alley three murders ago. Or two, she guesses the first had technically already happened at that point. “Gives
me real faith in the system.”

“And you two,” Mr. Grisly ignores Hiccup’s words like someone ignoring movie theater chatter at a long-awaited midnight premier, “together again. Together always, really, I can’t be the only one who notices.”

“And they still aren’t boning,” Ruffnut bemoans, resting her head on Tuff’s shoulder. “It’s pathetic.”

“Ruff!” Astrid hisses, lacking her usual enthusiasm for it but feeling beholden to at least try and lecture her friend.

“Trauma,” she shrugs, “did a real number on my filter, I guess.”

“You don’t have a filter,” Astrid grits her teeth, turning back to Mr. Grisly and wishing she’d never looked away. Feeling his eyes on hers is like finding predator footprints in snow that was unbroken before she blinked. She should apologize to stay on authority’s good side, like she did to Snotlout or Eretson, but something instinctive in the back of her brain assures her that she might as well roll over and bare her throat.

“Is an actual officer going to be taking our statements?” Hiccup sounds nothing like the guy who bought her a pizza or hung curtains to diffuse a situation. He sounds like he half hopes this one catches on fire.

“Everything you do or say goes through me eventually,” Grisly’s smile is tepid, teasing, and Hiccup’s jaw twitches.

“Well I’ve never been a fan of efficiency,” he shoves forced casual hands into his pockets, stiff arms moving like they’re pivoting on rusty hinges, “makes things too easy.”

“Too easy,” Grisly shakes his head, “where’s the fun in that?” He doesn’t wait for an answer, humming under his breath as he disappears back down the hallway and through a door to the right. Astrid wishes she hadn’t caught the tiniest glimpse of the corner of a steel table as she stares back at her feet.

“I guess that was a rhetorical question,” Hiccup stares down the hallway after him, gears picking up speed behind his expression.

Eretson takes their statements one by one. Ruffnut goes in after Snotlout, then Astrid, then Hiccup. The twins have an uncharacteristically quiet conversation with each other and Snotlout disappears into a different room down the hallway and Astrid finds herself flicking through Facebook, anything to distract herself. She’s scrolling past high school friends trying to make a glamorous living from the comfort of their own homes when she sees a picture of a shiny ring on an almost familiar finger and pauses.

Her cousin is engaged, apparently. Maybe it’s because her cousin is a year younger than her, but it’s not the usual, sick and envious feeling of being left behind that floods her chest. Right now, someone she grew up with, someone she caught fireflies with while Uncle Finn started the bonfire, is wearing a ring and planning a whole life around it. Meanwhile, Astrid has been privy to the murder of three people and the discovery of two mutilated bodies and seen the inside of a police station more than she ever dreamed.

She’s always believed that where someone starts out has something to do with where they end up, but that doesn’t feel particularly true at the moment.
It better not be, she thinks fiercely all at once, given that Ruff and Tuff started out next to Gruff.

“Alright then,” Eretson opens the door and Hiccup walks out of his office, taking up easy space next to Astrid and looking more casual than anyone has a right to look right after an interrogation. “I’ll be in touch with all of you, it’d be best if you didn’t—”

“Leave town, I get it,” Hiccup rolls his eyes, “I know the drill by now.”

“But we can go?” Tuffnut asks, “because we’ve been sitting here so long that my ass isn’t even asleep anymore, it’s technically crossed the line into coma.”

“You could have left at any time, dude,” Snotlout reappears from the back, obviously not pleased with whatever news he got.

“Given the…situation,” Eretson gestures almost awkwardly at Tuffnut, stern expression masklike for a second, “it would be best for you to be available too.”

“In case Gruffnut contacts me because of our deep and abiding bond?” Tuffnut nods to himself and Ruffnut smacks him on the chest.

“He’s dead, idiot, let’s go home.”

Snotlout walks the twins to their car, protective in a way that feels like a weight off of Astrid’s shoulders, and Hiccup rolls his shoulders like the concept of freedom makes him want to take up more space.

“Do I sound like a sociopath if I say I’m almost getting used to this?” He snorts, pulling out his phone and typing, “you know, I only used to cancel tours because of weather.”

“At least you know they’ll be more crowded than ever when you start back up,” Astrid doesn’t quite joke, because it’s not funny, and Hiccup doesn’t quite laugh. It’s more of a wheeze, an exhausted search for a laugh that falls flat in a way that resonates.

It’s been a long day.

“There’ll be so many more questions to dodge,” he shakes his head, “lucky me.”

Before Astrid can offer to help him dodge those questions, as seems to be her bizarre impulse, Snotlout reappears at Hiccup’s side and elbows him hard enough that he stumbles sideways.

“Why are you lucky? Is it because you got to find another creepy body, because that’s gross dude. Like you didn’t look guilty enough.”

“Right, thanks for reminding me that it’s frowned upon in the eyes of the law to discover three mutilated murder victims. I forgot.”

“That’s why I’m here,” Snotlout glares at the police station’s front door, “and probably why my boss doesn’t want me to come in and work this one.”

“They said that?” Astrid lowers her voice, almost sure that Mr. Grisly could be listening through the brick wall.

“I’m ‘too close’ to this one, apparently, as if I wouldn’t arrest you for way less than killing people.” Snotlout shakes his head.

“Right, just because you let me get away with some light trespassing doesn’t mean you aren’t
“itching to lock me up for something real,” Hiccup snorts, “after all, what are cousins for?”

“Exactly,” Snotlout looks between them, “so, what are we doing?”

“We?” Hiccup raises an eyebrow and Snotlout nods.

“Yeah, I get why Ruff ditched, but we could go get a drink or something.”

“We, as in you’re inviting yourself along?” Hiccup shoots Astrid a questioning look.

“You still want to go get frozen yogurt?” She scoffs, “now? After…”

After they found Gruffnut’s body, torn apart in an alley as part of a likely Viggo Grimborn emulating copy cat killer’s mysterious agenda.

“I could go for fro-yo,” Snotlout nods.

“How could you eat right now?” Hiccup shakes his head, incredulous.

“You’re the one who brought up frozen yogurt.”

“Yeah, I’m not going to eat it,” Hiccup gestures at himself with a broad hand, “I haven’t actually descended to the level of self-loathing that would lead me to torture myself on purpose with imposter ice-cream.”

“Fine, I’ll eat yours too.”

“Snotlout,” his hissing tone is familiar and Astrid reminds herself to text Ruffnut and make sure she got home ok, “I was going to go with Astrid. Alone.”

“Oh,” Snotlout grins, “you’re actually taking my excellent advice for once.”

“I’m really not,” Hiccup’s blush stretches to the tips of his ears, half hidden in floppy chestnut hair.

“Say no more, I’ll borrow your fancy headphones as soon as I get home,” Snotlout waves as he walks away and Hiccup calls after him.

“Don’t touch my headphones.” He sighs and runs a hand through his hair, “we don’t have to go now, if you don’t want—”

“No, I want to. As long as you don’t expect me to eat,” she laughs, counting the freckles across the bridge of Hiccup’s nose to avoid remembering why she’s not hungry.

“Great,” he nods, leading her across the street.

The walk is quiet, not awkward but tired, but Hiccup can’t restrain himself from pointing out a couple of landmarks along the way. They’re not all Grimborn, he points out the spot where Snotlout allegedly arrested a mob boss with an eye roll, but most are. Or at least Grimborn era. Something about walking with Hiccup makes the city feel older and more alive, like the buildings trust him enough to tell a bit of what they’ve seen.

Today they’re mourning.

The frozen yogurt shop is as soulless as the alleys aren’t, a bouncy pop song playing entirely at odds with Astrid’s mood as she half fills the smallest size with something orange she doesn’t intend to eat. The toppings are mildly more interesting and she gets enough chocolate chips to cover the
sad heap of already melting frozen yogurt at the bottom of her cup.

“We don’t do gift cards,” the girl at the counter hands the card back to Hiccup.

“The person who gave me this swore they bought it here,” Hiccup insists, “there’s ten bucks on it. I’ve never touched it.”

“We aren’t Yogurt Palace anymore, the place got bought last year,” the girl shrugs and he reaches into his pocket for his wallet. It’s thick with folded bills, mostly tens and twenties, and he drops a couple of dollars into the tip jar on the counter when he gets his change, proving his chivalry even though she said he didn’t have to. They sit at the table furthest from the door and Astrid watches the yogurt spin in the dispensers.

The black cherry sorbet looks like blood.

“So, what was Snotlout’s advice?” She looks back at Hiccup, idly stirring chocolate chips into her yogurt soup. It’s the right thing to say, because he blushes again, the rise in color highlighting the stubble along his jaw.

“You caught that, huh?” He laughs, “what he didn’t mention is that he gave me the advice while letting his self-tanner set, so he rendered it null and void in the instant.”

“If it’s void, there can’t be any harm in telling me.”

“Trust me, there’s usually harm in repeating anything Snotlout says in front of girls I want to like me.” He’s almost smug under the layer of embarrassment that she still wants to peel back, “or in your case, continue to like me. I guess.”

She takes a chocolate chip out of her cup and flicks it at him. It bounces off of his cheek and leaves a little smudge of yogurt behind.

“Did you just use me for target practice?” His quiet laugh fills the space and makes it feel smaller, more private. It’s an extension of his ability to make alleys feel safe and Astrid has never felt compelled to get closer to someone who shifts her perception away from reality before. “And waste chocolate?”

“I like you, we confirmed that.” She tries to think about kissing him without thinking about where it last happened and how it’s connected to the rest of her day. It doesn’t work. She can’t untangle Hiccup from Grimborn and she doesn’t want to, as convenient as it might seem.

And she can’t untangle Grimborn from what they saw in the alley.

“What’s up?” He puts his hand on hers, frowning and leaning closer across the small table. “Was this a bad idea?”

“Wasn’t that the point? You wanted to go on a bad date to do something you don’t like,” she snorts, “if anything starting at the police station rounds out the experience.”

“Finding the murder first does seem to lessen the chances of being interrupted by murder,” he idly traces between freckles on her wrist with a light fingertip, “you know, just, statistically.”

“Plus, they seem to be happening a couple weeks apart.” She bites her lip and lets the dam break open. “I’m trying not to jump to conclusions here, but I keep looping back to the fact that the next one is going to be at my place.”
“I wouldn’t call that a jump.” Hiccup worries about her like she’s capable, like he wants to help but won’t try and fix the problem for her. He’s soundproof curtains she can close when she wants, not a bricked in window to eliminate the possibility of a problem. “More of a dainty little step. A shuffle, even.”

“And the fact that they aren’t letting Snotlout work on the case…maybe you’re right about the Ryker finger parallel,” she leans in and lowers her voice, “it can’t be coincidence that you keep…you know, that you’re involved.”

“I think it’s a ‘we’re involved’ at this point, alibi,” he squeezes her hand and it’s definitely a term of endearment this time.

Her laugh startles her, too loud, and Hiccup raises an eyebrow.

“Sorry, I just—while you were being interrogated due to the third murder victim you’ve stumbled across, I checked Facebook—”

“As you do while waiting to make your witness statement about the second mutilated body you’ve discovered, of course.”

“Exactly, it’s—apparently my cousin is engaged, she’s a year younger than me and she’s wedding planning right now while I’m…and that’s a really awkward thing to bring up on a first date,” she shakes her head and laughs again, glad when Hiccup laughs with her.

“I’ll tell you what, if I’m not in jail for murders I didn’t commit, I’ll go to the wedding with you.” It’s too much and not enough all at once and Astrid hates that she doesn’t even have room to wonder if she wants that. She can’t decide if she wants Hiccup in a suit in a hotel ballroom taking advantage of an open bar with her a year from now because her head is full of Grimborn and worrying about the locks on her front door. She can’t even think about her parents making Hiccup sleep on the pullout couch in the den because they aren’t married because she’s sure there’s some answer in that creepy note.

“I’m on a date that’s been postponed due to anonymously mailed body parts and you called me alibi like a pet name and a serial killer is probably targeting my apartment and she’s looking at dresses that probably cost more than my rent and we’re the same age, essentially. It’s…”

“No, I get it, I think being in your mid-twenties is like that for everyone to some degree. Some of my high school friends are married with children and some of them are still posting pictures of them smoking weed on the internet,” Hiccup laughs, “none of them are being framed for murder though. Hey, that would have been a good yearbook superlative, Most Likely to be Suspected of Murder.”

Astrid doesn’t like to hear him say it. Like everything he says, he makes it more real. More immediate.

“I would not have won, for the record.” He goes back to tracing freckles on her arm and she ducks down to meet his eyeline.

“Do you think you’re really a suspect?”

“I think I don’t look good,” he shrugs, “I don’t think Eretson thinks I did it but…it seems like there’s pressure to investigate me further.”

“From Grisly?” Astrid guesses and Hiccup’s lips twitch.
“You know, I have no concrete evidence of that, but he’s just so creepy that I really think so.” He reaches into her bowl for a chocolate chip and eats it, wrinkling his nose, “what flavor is that, spoiled milk?”

“I didn’t even look,” she tries a piece of chocolate and comes to a similar conclusion, “but isn’t all yogurt technically spoiled milk?”

“What person decided eating spoiled milk was a good idea?” He picks up his spoon, putting on a silly voice, “this food definitely smells different than yesterday and also sour, guess I’ll just dig in even though grandma died from eating old chicken last week.”

“I bet it was morbid curiosity,” she looks down at her bowl.

“Well, I wouldn’t know anything about that.” Hiccup is the only person Astrid has ever met who is so self-assured about being weird. Maybe Ruffnut, except it’s different, Ruffnut just doesn’t care what people think of her. Hiccup does care. She can see it in his eyes every time he tries to make her laugh.

“Of course not,” she meshes her fingers with his and he grins.

“You know, while I was being interrogated for the fourth time about finding murder victims or parts of them—"

“As you do.”

“Yes, I don’t even know why I even count anymore, I should get an app or something to do that for me, but I kept thinking about what you said in the bar about the note being a clue or something, and I think you’re right.” He’s happy that she overthought again and her stomach flutters. “Not just about the whole ‘all right’ versus ‘alright’ thing describing Dave. But I think there was a clue there, the whole ‘rudderless grime’ thing.”

“You know, now that you mention it, I think I could have described Gruffnut as ‘rudderless grime’.” Astrid was raised not to speak ill of the dead, but it’s what Gruff would have wanted. If there’s an afterlife, he’s probably thrilled to know that she is in fact still pissed about the fifty bucks and that anger is the best monument she can give him.

“And his bar is coated in layers of grime,” Hiccup nods, “and it wasn’t going anywhere, he was still affording rent even though other places are struggling because this neighborhood has it’s whole new direction thing.” He looks suspiciously around the frozen yogurt shop, “and a seedy bar doesn’t fit in with micro-distilleries and the thirteen yoga shops that sprung up on that block overnight. And Gruff had no intention of changing direction, hence rudderless--”

“I think that’s a leap.” Astrid shakes her head, “to say that someone wrote a threatening note on a foot they sent to Snotlout planning to kill Gruffnut because his shitty bar was miraculously succeeding is…that’s a whole basket of leaps.”

“I know,” he bites his lip, puffing his cheeks out and sighing, “I need more proof.”

“That’s usually not how it works. Usually you make the theory around the evidence, not the other way around.”

“I know that, or well, I don’t, because everyone goes the wrong way all the time. Or at least Heather does which…” He pauses to breathe then continues in a whisper, his eyes deadly serious, “the thing is if I’m right, and that’s a big if, I know that, but…if I’m right…I think it leads back to Mr. Grisly.”
"People who do this don’t look at pictures of it like that."

The plain-faced supposition of Hiccup’s innocence in Eretson’s office after Dave’s murder flashed back into Hiccup’s mind the second that Grisly saw Tuffnut. Hiccup had looked at those crime scene photos with a shivering, pale-faced feeling of dread, something more instinctive and paralyzing than fear. With a slow spreading numbness in the center of his brain, somewhere between clinical detachment and an abstract refusal to accept the reality of the gore.

But when Grisly saw Tuffnut and smiled like he was imagining a duplication of the horrible scene in the alley, Hiccup wondered instantly if that’s what Eretson meant. What if people who murder and mutilate their victims look at the pictures like Grisly stared down Tuffnut? More than predatory. Not a hungry lion but a bored housecat holding a trapped mouse by the end of its tail.

Astrid’s right, it’s a basket of leaps, but leaps based on a gut feeling that gets deeper the longer that Hiccup tries to shake it off.

He knows that theories are supposed to be based on facts, and he tries, really, but usually his theories are based on flippant comments that connect two things with a random click. A joke that amounts to pulling two random puzzle pieces out of a thousand-piece box and finding a mysterious miracle fit. The first click is enough to make him curious and that’s when he shifts to more systemic tactics, looking for corners and edges and working inward with obvious patterns until a picture starts to form.

Johann’s ads got huge, so he must have been making money, and in comparing the dates of his biggest ads to the dates of the murders, a blurry but cohesive picture emerged. It’s eternally unfinished though, a puzzle in an elementary school library, some pieces pocketed and some chewed up and hidden away or just plain lost.

All the pieces of this puzzle are still here though, it’s only three quarters unwrapped, and Hiccup happened to slip two miracle pieces out of the side of the box. Grisly looks at people like he knows what’s under their skin, but wants to visually confirm. And as Eretson glared over Hiccup’s shoulder out that bulletproof window, the corners started to take shape.

Grisly wedges himself where he doesn’t belong. Grisly works for the condos that do the same, muddling the character of Downtown Berk into something new and clean that just doesn’t fit. Grisly hired Heather, who enhances unfinished puzzles from cryptid pictures of a real solution to high definition snapshots, like a thesaurus fueled scientist on CSI.

He doesn’t want it to take shape, necessarily, but at the same time he can’t stop dwelling on it, finding grains of fact in the space of it. Pieces craving one or two matches attach to the bigger, truth shaped possibility. And with Snotlout stuck on traffic duty, Hiccup can’t go research at the station without looking more suspicious. But then again, a few sepia toned pixels from a half-ruined older version of similar events might provide insight to the shape emerging from cool alleyway fog.

That’s half the reason he goes to the archives two days after finding Gruffnut’s body. He never spent that much time on the Elizabeth Smith murder, probably because no one questions a beginning. Well, no one but Astrid, with her theory that her apartment isn’t involved at all, rewriting the root of the narration in an attempt to distance herself from it.
He wishes that tactic was working better for her.

The other half of his reason for visiting ticks up to an easy seventy five percent when he’s halfway down the stairs and hears Astrid’s voice, hovering just past the cusp of irritated above the sound of rustling papers.

“...being ridiculous, Fish,” she snaps, setting something heavy down on what Hiccup assumes is her desk.

“I’m no Grimborn-ologist—”

“Not what it sounds like.”

“It’s simple pattern recognition,” Fishlegs’s arms are crossed when Hiccup comes around the corner, and Astrid is elbow deep in a dusty box of paper scraps, a brown smear across her scowling eyebrow. “All I’m saying is that there’s reason to believe there will be a murder at your apartment in the next week and a half, and I have a guest room—”

“You’re looking for somewhere to stay?” Hiccup blurts and they both turn to look at him. Astrid tries to wipe the streak of dirt off of her forehead and leaves a larger smudge behind and Fishlegs sighs heavily through flaring nostrils, moustache barely budging in the breeze.

“She’s not looking, she has one.”

“I’m not looking because I don’t need one,” Astrid corrects him, going back to sorting through her box, “what are you doing here?” The question starts out harsh and ends flat, but she shoots him a genuinely curious look and he shrugs.

“I was hoping to do some research,” he says cautiously, edging a step closer to her desk to try and see what she’s looking at. “And maybe see you, if that’s ok?”

“I don’t know, have you done your taxes?” Fishlegs rolls his eyes.

“I didn’t realize I needed to pay taxes to talk to Astrid,” Hiccup tries to drag a laugh out of the room, but it doesn’t work, the air as stale and tense as the centuries old contentions in the papers around them. “If so, is there a special form? Or a student loan balance exemption—”

“What are you looking for?” Astrid abruptly pulls her hands out of the box, wiping dusty handprints on her jeans and gesturing back at the stacks.

“I was going to umm,” he thinks briefly about lying, given the conversation he walked in on, but thinks better of it with her paralyzing blue eyes staring straight through him. “I was going to brush up on that first Elizabeth Smith article, actually.”

“Sure,” she waves him along after her and he follows down an unfamiliar, narrow catalog of books to the left and through a door into a dingy back room full of boxes.

“It smells like my dead great aunt’s attic in here,” he comments, running his finger over a dusty letter box that threatens to crumble under the gentle touch.

“Maybe she donated something,” Astrid stacks two dirty boxes on top of each other and wipes down a table with a dust cloth. “This is the new arrivals room, but Fishlegs said if I shuffled things around, I could make it the Grimborn room. I already moved some of the Grimborn things in here after I caught people trying to sneak out with them in their coats.” She picks up a carefully folded but newly wrinkled newspaper and sets it down on the clean section of table, “Elizabeth Smith
Then, with a casually familiar but all too brief pat on his shoulder, she walks back towards the door.

“Wait,” he turns around and she stops, looking at him expectantly, “I was kidding about using you as a tax loophole, I actually did come to see you.”

“I know, but I’m working,” her lips twitch into a small but sincere smile as she shrugs and leaves the room and he can’t help but remember her kissing him goodbye after their date. He wanted to walk her home, but it felt like bad luck, just more time to peek into alleys and have another moment ruined. He got the feeling she silently agreed and they both ended up calling rides, much to Snotlout’s instant disappointment.

And Hiccup’s slightly delayed disappointment.

It was the first time their dare-he-say romantic interaction didn’t get smothered by a new murder discovery or accusation in the next twenty-four hours. No, this time there have been no tours full of prying questions or alleys full of gore or faces full of suspicion, just empty hours to think about Astrid.

One time he stopped responding to a girl after three unremarkable but overall decent dates after she mentioned being the fifth wheel on a ski trip with two of her coupled up friends. It was June. Just the thought of tying himself to a potential weekend months in the future with a girl he barely knew made him back off, even though she’d tagged along on a tour and handled meeting Snotlout with a surprising amount of grace.

On a first date with Astrid, he offered to be her date to a family wedding at some point far in the future.

He tried to pawn it off on the fact that Eretson spent their entire interview looking at him like a perfectly healthy dog abandoned at a high kill shelter for being ugly, but being a more-than-potential murder suspect isn’t affecting his decision making as much as it probably should. The fact of the matter is when Astrid started yelling theories down at him from her window, she did what he’d always banked on being impossible. She made learning about the past make him think about the future. She gave him something to look forward to, to depend on. And then she had to take over his tour with an impossible picture and kiss him surrounded by history and anchor him again and again when things kept turning for the worst.

For the first time in five years, he’s desperate for forward motion. And more than that forward motion towards something. Someone. Even scarier, with someone.

“Finding anything?” Astrid’s voice breaks his concentration and he blinks twice at the paper he hasn’t even started to read.

“What?” He shakes his head, watching her set down another heavy looking box and start digging through it.

“I asked if you were finding anything,” she smiles at him, a fond minimal smile he definitely hasn’t done anything to deserve, “sorry to break your deep concentration.”

“No, you’re good, I wasn’t concentrating on the right thing anyway.” He laughs and it feels more like a lie when she nods bemused and turns to leave, “or I mean I was, actually, concentrating on something more important than reading this old thing again.” He smacks his knuckles on the edge
of the table when he gestures at the paper and she raises an eyebrow. “Can I help? It looks like you’re sorting through things, I could help with that.”

“I thought you were here to research.”

“I’ve got nothing but time,” he shrugs, “unless you don’t trust me not to pocket any of this delightfully dusty paper.”

“I trust you,” she says it like it’s a phrase in a foreign language she’s just learning, “I just found all these boxes under that table where we were displaying some of the Enquirer correspondence, I have no idea what’s in them.”

“Have you informed Area Fifty-One that you’re on the cusp of a big discovery?” He asks seriously as she opens the box and she elbows him a little harder than necessary on the way to set the old lid down. “Ok, I get it, don’t diss the Enquirer, you don’t have to break a rib.”

“You know how I feel about the Enquirer,” she teases, voice dipping, and Hiccup’s heart jumps in his throat remembering his too big hat on her head and how fiercely beautiful she is when she’s trying to convince him that she’s right.

“Right, it’s the clandestine shrine to the preservation of the everyman’s most rationally thought out theories about their place in the universe,” he talks too fast, like always, but Astrid keeps up, narrowing her eyes and shoving a heavy manila folder at his chest. He promptly nearly drops it, barely saving a scrap of paper from drifting out the bottom. “This could be a priceless piece of history—”

“I’m working.” she turns back to the box and squints to decipher a handwritten date at the top of a page of notes. “Stop.”

“Stop what?”

“Flirting.” The red on her cheeks is more obvious when she holds another clipping up to the light and pointedly avoids his eyeline.

“What? I’m not flirting,” he relishes in even the tiniest second that he has her unbalanced. And it’s true, he didn’t think he was flirting, he was talking about the Berk Enquirer, that’s not flirting. Maybe Astrid thinks that’s flirting.

“I’m working,” she repeats and Hiccup turns around to lean back against the table, studying her like she’s studying an old dusty letter.

“I can see that.” He cocks his head at her and she spares him a glare, the heat rising further in her cheeks when he doesn’t flinch.

She has a face made for smiling but she holds it like she resents even the implication of that decision being made for her. Maybe it’s because she knows he’s watching her, but the line of her jaw is tense, working quietly as she knits her brows together and sounds out an unfamiliar word to herself. She’s all contrast, upright spine in a comfortable sweatshirt, hair in front of her ears escaping a neat ponytail, fundamentally kind eyes bristling at his persistent attention.

“I thought you were going to help,” she breaks, setting the letter down gently with frustrated hands.

“Am I qualified to sort through the Enquirer?” He touches a folded paper in the box, using false reverence as an excuse to step closer. “Or can you point me to some sort of bullshit subtext
interpretation certification?” He takes a notebook out of the box and starts skimming through it, carefully avoiding disturbing a century old folded corner on a page. “Some kind of supply manifesto? Doesn’t look like a big ship, maybe a private merchant?”

“On second thought, I don’t need your help,” she takes the notebook from him, dusty fingers grazing over his hand. Her eyes flick to his lips, almost a glare, and it would be funnier if it didn’t make the dingy room feel so much warmer.

“Sorry,” he says even though he isn’t, backing up a step and giving her what he hopes is an at least half-convincing apologetic smile, “I didn’t believe that you actually considered making fun of the Enquirer to be flirting. I had to check.”

“That’s not—what is your thing with visiting me at work anyway?” She huffs, sorting things into nonsense piles without reading them.

“You visit me at my work every night.”

“That’s because you bring your work to my apartment,” she says slowly like she’s disappointed she has to explain something so obvious to him.

“Here I was feeling flattered,” he shakes his head, letting her get back to reading before continuing, “I do have a reason to visit you though. I’m worried that too much time with Fishlegs might bring you to his side of the historic copier blood feud we have going on.”

She snorts, “so you came to annoy so much it shoves me in that direction, ok.”

“I was just thinking that it absolutely doesn’t bode well for me if you’re staying with him while,” he pauses, trying to think of a half-decent way to say this, “you know, your apartment is…while you’re waiting to see if—”

“If there’s a fourth murder,” she stands up straight and dares him to argue with her, “I’m not scared, or even if I am, I’m not going to run just because Fishlegs thinks I can’t take care of myself.”

“Who said anything about running?” Hiccup gestures at himself, “all I’m saying is that I know what it’s like to be constantly inconvenienced by where these murders keep happening. It makes sense to umm, lean on someone who gets that unique complication, I think. So if you need some place to stay because Eretson’s creeping you out by glowering at the chalk outline on your living room floor all day, I get that.” He waits for her to respond but she’s just staring at him, apparently confused, all of that righteous anger fading into something tired that makes him want to hug her.

“I don’t have a fancy guest room with all the…I don’t know, little soaps and stuff that Fishlegs probably has but—” He yelps when she punches his arm, “what—”

“I said stop flirting with me while I’m working,” she tucks her hair behind her ear, “and inviting me to stay with you when you don’t have an extra bed is definitely flirting, you don’t need to double check that one.”

“Oh, I didn’t—I can see how you—not that I don’t want, I mean, I’ve finally had a little time away from murder to clear my head and you’re so—”

“Then what did you mean?” She asks the right question, bouncing him back to the root of the issue even as he’s still trying to swallow his foot.

“I don’t like the idea of you being involved in whatever’s going on more than you already are.” He reaches for her hand and she lets him, her stubborn expression falling slightly, “I hate feeling
like I’ve involved you in this, I hate that you have to be my alibi, I—if anything else is going to happen, I want both of us, but you especially, to be far away from it.”

“I don’t think you have much say in how involved you are,” she says quietly and he hates that his heart stutters when he realizes that she’s worried about him. It shouldn’t make him happy, especially when he’s saying how much he hates that she’s involved, but it does anyway.

“That’s fair, given how this has gone so far, but digging a foxhole and hunkering down in your particular apartment right now doesn’t seem like a way to disentangle either of us.” He squeezes her hand and while she doesn’t back down, she seems to remember that it’s a thing she could be capable of, with much conscious effort and determination. “Plus, I was going to offer you Snotlout’s bed, I thought you’d really appreciate all of the Patriots posters and the signed football in a glass case—”

“No,” she laughs, shaking her head, “absolutely not.”

“Framed tickets from some big game—”

“Over my dead body.”

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“Gruff’s is open?” Snotlout sits bolt upright on the couch, jerking Hiccup out of his book. Viggo Grimborn Solved: The Admiral Haddock Connection is even better after Astrid returned it with comments, mostly half coherent swearing about how stupid it is on little blue sticky notes, because she wouldn’t write in any book, even one she thinks is this stupid.

“I can think of one really big reason that’s not possible,” Hiccup hunkers down further in his father’s chair, carefully holding a sticky note aside to read the words underneath it.

“Just got a text from Johnson, they just broke up a fight there, it’s totally open.”

“I don’t see how Gruff’s could be open, dude.” He’s halfway through a sentence when Snotlout snatches the book and grabs his wrist, yanking him unwilling and stumbling to his feet. “Give that back—”

“Astrid’s…not even dirty notes,” he wrinkles his nose in disgust, “will be here when we get back.”

“My back’s killing me, I don’t want to walk all the way down to Gruff’s just to find it predictably closed, as usually happens when bar owners are murdered.”

“Then get an Uber,” Snotlout is undeterred, tossing Hiccup’s shoes at him, “unless you spent all the money you made with those big-ass tours on some lame book or something.”

“I don’t know when I’ll be able to start tours again, this money might have to last a while.” Hiccup is glad that the original floor plan of 324 Harbor Road he ordered yesterday hasn’t arrived yet, even though it only looks expensive because it’s old paper. In reality, finding something that specific and having it shipped overnight would usually cost way more than the couple hundred dollars he spent on it.

“You could get a normal job—”

“Fine, I’ll come look at the locked front door of Gruff’s with you,” he starts putting on his shoes, “just leave the concept of a job out of it.”
So Hiccup hasn’t been having the easiest time of it lately and he spent some time trying to find the shift between his original holding pattern and the quick descending chaos of the last couple months. His mind immediately jumps to Astrid and her toothbrush and the midnight tour that entangled them in something bigger and more horrible than he could have imagined, but if he thinks a little deeper, his trouble started way before her.

Hiccup’s life took a turn for the dismal when Snotlout started having frequent opportunities to say ‘I told you so’.

Gruff’s is definitely open. If anything, it has more than its usual crowd and Hiccup spots a few people in Ripped Tavern shirts around a booth when they first step inside. Of course, Gruffnut’s murder would have caused a real increase in a certain kind of business, but as seedy as he was, Hiccup can’t see how he would have managed to take advantage of it.

When they finally make it through the crowd, there’s a split second where Hiccup thinks that Gruffnut has miraculously done exactly that, but then the doppelganger behind the bar tries to twirl a bottle like Tom Cruise and when it shatters on the floor, he breaks into an unmistakably authentic grin. In years of coming here, Hiccup never saw Gruffnut smile.

“If this is your bar, that’s your gin you just threw on the floor, idiot,” Ruffnut is leaning on the bar and pleading with who Hiccup obviously must accept is her brother, even though it’s still really creepy.

“I’ll get the hang of it,” Tuffnut assures, picking up another bottle and starting to throw it.

“If you’re just going to smash that, can I have it?” Snotlout tries, sliding onto a stool beside Ruffnut and holding out his hand.

“No,” Ruffnut chastises him, “at least pay for it.”

“Here you go,” Tuffnut sets it on the counter with a couple of shot glasses, “it’s on the house. I’ve always wanted to say that. I don’t know who calls a bar a house though, that’s never made sense to me, you can’t live in a bar.”

“That means that the business is eating the cost of the drink,” Ruff groans, but she doesn’t think twice about accepting a shot from Snotlout.

“Good, down with the business.” Tuffnut pours himself a shot out of the bottle and clinks it with Snotlout’s, “and the man and the establishment and—”

“Tuff, you are the business. That’s your money now.” Ruffnut points to an official looking piece of paper that was recently on the bad end of an attempted bartending trick involving blue curacao. “You have to sell this place.”

“Sell?” Hiccup sits down, leaning on the bar to relieve the aggravated ache in his lower back. Just leaning doesn’t do much and he accepts a shot from Snotlout, who seems to be doing more actual bartending than the person behind the bar. “When did you buy it?”

“Like five years ago, apparently,” Tuffnut shrugs, wiping the filthy bar with a rag and refilling a glass someone brings him. “Do I look cool or what?”

“Gruffnut put it in Tuff’s name,” Ruffnut tosses a shot glass at him and it misses, shattering on the floor, “look over here, Tuff, I mean it. Look at what that asshole did to your credit score.”

“Uh, you already showed me that, my credit score is perfect. Beautiful bastard had one more gift
to give me.” He pauses to wipe a fake tear, absently glugging vodka into someone’s highball glass as they come up to the bar to order again.

“Um, can I get a well whisky, neat?” The would-be paying customer asks and Tuffnut rolls his eyes.

“Well, whisky is pretty neat, but this vodka is fancy.”

“How much?” They look dubiously at the mostly full glass of alcohol and Tuffnut shrugs.

“On the house.”

Hiccup reaches in front of Snotlout and grabs the piece of paper, a bank statement of some kind, and raises his eyebrow, “your credit score is 420?”

“Nice,” Snotlout holds his hand out for a high five and Tuffnut narrows his eyes.

“Aren’t you a cop?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh,” Tuffnut claps his hand to Snotlout’s over the bar and pours another sloppy round that Hiccup decides to sip rather than knock back all at once, “I didn’t know you guys were in on the code. Hip to the lingo, as it were.”

“Did you come with Astrid?” Ruffnut asks, looking genuinely concerned when Tuffnut makes sloppy change for a tray of beers and struggles to slam the register door shut.

“No,” Hiccup instantly wishes he’d changed his shirt or looked in a mirror before leaving. In his defense, he thought he was going to a bar that was closed due to murder, but that doesn’t matter now. “Is she coming?”

“She said she was on her way.”

Hiccup isn’t really used to panic. His first reaction to a problem is usually more along the lines of breaking it down or figuring it out. And he knows he doesn’t have proof, he doesn’t have anything but a gut feeling and the memory of feeling chilled to the bone when Grisly looked at Astrid at the archives, but thinking of her walking alone still makes the hair on the back of his neck stand on end.

“How long ago?” He tries to sound buoyantly curious but Ruffnut sees through it.

“A little early to be keeping tabs, isn’t it? You two have been on like one date.”

“He was reading her dorky little notes in his book all afternoon,” Snotlout snorts, “he’s probably wondering if he has time to go get it so they can discuss.” The last word is in Snotlout’s favorite, completely inaccurate nasal tone and Hiccup rolls his eyes.

“They’re over here!” Tuffnut shouts in the vague direction of the door from the other end of the bar, all while pouring beer and spilling most of it on the floor when he uses a full glass to point towards Hiccup.

“So it’s true,” Astrid fights her way through the crowd a second later, catching herself on Hiccup’s shoulder when someone jostles her, “this is exactly what I would have guessed Tuffnut playing bartender would look like.”
“I’m winning bartender, thanks,” he gestures at the shelves behind him, “or I will be when I figure out how to reach the bottles on the top shelf.”

“Keep giving those out for free,” Snotlout nods and Tuffnut points at him.

“Good call, why should I use storage I can’t even reach?” He turns around and starts staring at the liquor shelves, “does not spark joy…”

“Does he know that’s all his now?” Astrid leans in close enough to ask Hiccup in particular, her breath cool against his ear in the over-crowded bar.

“There have been attempts to explain it to him, I don’t think any have sunk in.” He laughs and she leans a little harder on his shoulder, “so Gruff had the bar in Tuffnut’s name?”

“Apparently,” she shifts, lips nearly against his ear when she speaks again, “a letter showed up at the twins apartment earlier with no return address and a copy of the deed inside.”

“No return address?” Hiccup frowns and turns to face her, momentarily preoccupied by the mystery enough to fend off being overwhelmed by her proximity and the tickle of her hair against his cheek, “did you recognize the handwriting?”

“It wasn’t Comic Sans,” her smile is tight and not quite comforting, teasing and oddly protective at the same time. “If that’s what you’re asking.”

“Not in so many words.” He scrambles when Astrid half falls into his lap, half catching her and flinching when she pushes herself back upright with a hand on his head.

“Snotlout, oh my god,” she snaps and Hiccup can hear Snotlout rolling his eyes.

“I’m just trying to hand you a shot, get the rest of the way onto Hiccup’s lap if you’re so clumsy.”

“I’m not clumsy,” she fixes her shirt but keeps her elbow on Hiccup’s shoulder, “and it’s Wednesday, you know that, right?”

“We’re celebrating the fact that this bar doesn’t suck anymore without Gruffnut being a dick to cops,” he shoves a shot into her hand and half of it sloshes onto Hiccup’s leg, thankfully cooling the idea of Astrid on his lap. He’s doubly thankful for the sudden chill when she shifts behind him to let someone through, her fingernails almost habitually raking across the nape of his neck.

She pauses and he wonders if she caught his shiver, but then an unmistakably familiar voice attached to partially familiar biceps next to them announces itself.

“What do you mean Gruffnut Thorston didn’t get along with the police?” Eretson leans on the bar, almost unrecognizable in a black tee-shirt with the sleeves ripped off. Almost, except for the absolutely familiar, business-like scowl he’s directing at Snotlout.

“Oh come on,” Snotlout throws his head back but still manages to slap Tuffnut’s hand when he sets a free high ball glass of something from the top shelf in front of Eretson, “don’t serve him—”

“This is Gruffnut Thorston’s bar, isn’t it?” Eretson shakes his head and does a double-take when he catches sight of Astrid out of the corner of his eye. “And you’re here.” He looks at Hiccup and then pans past Tuffnut to Ruffnut on Snotlout’s other side, “you’re all here.”

“I am,” Ruffnut nods, “but your sleeves aren’t, and I have to ask, are those guns standard issue?”
“Come on,” Snotlout groans, spinning on his seat to face Eretson and nearly jabbing him in the chest with an intentional but thankfully hesitant finger. “What are you doing here?”

“Some friends invited me,” Eretson sounds almost bashful, like he’s not supposed to tell suspects that he has friends, and maybe he’s not. That sounds like the kind of protocol Snotlout wouldn’t mention breaking.

“Now you’re bragging about having friends—“ Snotlout starts but Eretson stops him with a clap on the shoulder firm enough to at least attempt to anchor him back to his sensibility, that is if he had any.

“Wait, how do you all know each other?”

The pause is long enough that the initial awkward silence fades back into the indistinguishable din of the crowded bar and Hiccup clears his throat.

“So, again, I gave a Viggo Grimborn tour to Astrid’s apartment and Snotlout is my cousin and at some point he went by Astrid’s place and met Ruffnut and—“

“Shut up.” Snotlout hisses, kicking Hiccup a little too hard in the shin. His left shin. The metallic ringing echoes in Hiccup’s ears and he waits for Eretson to hear it. For the air in the room to shatter.

“My office. Eight o’clock tomorrow. Be on time or I’ll send officers to collect you.” Eretson slaps the bar and turns around, disappearing back into the crowd.
Chapter 17

Astrid (2:37pm): yeah, sorry Fish, I’m not going to make it in to close tonight, I’m still at the station

Fishlegs (2:38pm): thanks for letting me know

Astrid (2:38pm): and I know I owe you, I’ll cover two of your shifts next week

Fishlegs (2:39pm): it’s slow anyway, just worry about keeping yourself out of jail

Astrid (2:39pm): not worried about that at all, I’ve barely been talked to

Fishlegs (2:40pm): that makes sense, given all the reasons to focus on Hiccup

Astrid (2:40pm): what reasons?
Astrid (2:41pm): did eretson call you? What did you tell him? What reasons?
Astrid (2:41pm): aside from the obvious bad luck, but they already know about all of that
Astrid (2:42pm): Fish.
Astrid (2:43pm): Fish. Legs. Answer me.

Eretson steps out of the interrogation room where he’s been talking to Ruffnut for what feels like forever, according to Astrid’s fully comatose ass and she stands up to hope for an update. Snotlout is leaning rigid against the wall across from her and he pretends not to notice Eretson until the detective addresses him.

“Jorgenson, the suspect says you were with her the night that she threatened the victim, can you attest to that? How serious did her threats seem?”

Snotlout scratches behind his ear and winces, “uh, I wouldn’t really say I’m a reliable witness for this one.”

“What do you mean you’re not a reliable witness?” Eretson’s face doesn’t move, Astrid half wonders if it still can.

“I mean that I’m…” Snotlout looks at her for help and she glares back at him, willing him to say something—anything—helpful. “Yeah, no, we fucked.”

“You slept with the suspect.” Nothing in Eretson’s miserable deadpan is a question.

“Yeah,” Snotlout snorts, quoting around his words with his fingers, “that’s what we did. ‘Sleep’. Uh-huh—“

“You slept with the suspect,” Eretson booms, his voice filling the sterile hallway and reverberating in tune with the throbbing in Astrid’s head. “The one time you were in the right place at the right time. The one time you could be fucking useful to an actual case—“

“I’m useful a lot, just because my life doesn’t revolve around you—“

“Not a reliable witness,” Eretson scoffs.

“It wouldn’t be ethical.” Snotlout crosses his arms, looking to Astrid for support, and her helplessness blooms into anger and she smacks his arm. “Hey! Assault on an officer—“
“I didn’t see anything,” Eretson shrugs.

“Not funny, that’s going to bruise.” He makes a big, stupid show of rolling his shoulder and Astrid glares at him.

“I’m not a reliable witness at this time,” Eretson sighs at the interrogation room door like it’s an obstacle he has no real interest in overcoming but he has to try anyway.

“Dude—“

“I think the soundproofing works both ways if you need to hit him more,” the detective whispers conspiratorially to Astrid, finally driven to something like humor, and she hates how much she wants to like him even when he has Hiccup on the other side of one of these doors.

“I will if it gets me out of here sooner,” she glances at the clock, resolving to get an answer from Fishlegs in person if he doesn’t text her back soon.

“Yeah, if you want assaulting an officer on your record, go ahead.” Snotlout is a familiar kind of antsy and furious and Astrid can’t help but relate to it after seven hours spent pacing a hallway and trying to put together all her friends’ futures out of barely overheard scraps.

Tuffnut’s credit and bar inheritance linking him to Gruffnut, Ruffnut’s too specific threats, and Hiccup’s knack for being at the wrong place at the wrong time are all spiraling, condensing on something Astrid feels looming even if she can’t see it. It’s like she’s looking at the sun, trying to find the source of the shadows while the answer hides in a dark spot in her vision.

“You aren’t even on duty, Jorgenson,” Eretson glares at the uniform Snotlout wore to look more official, and shakes his head, unimpressed. Maybe it’s Eretson’s sleeveless tee-shirt under his usual suit jacket or the dark circles under his eyes, like he spent all night working instead of planning his appearance, but his tolerance for Snotlout is even lower than usual.

Astrid has that in common with him.

“Why am I never on duty when things happen?” Snotlout snaps, forfeiting the staring contest and throwing his arms in the air.

“You aren’t, are you?” Eretson freezes, eyes narrowed, shoulders tense in clothes that suddenly look too small as his jaw flexes. “What are the chances of everything happening when you’re off duty?”

It’s a rhetorical question but Snotlout starts to answer anyway, counting on his fingers and rolling his eyes, “well considering two nights off a week, non-consecutive because fuck me, right? And you multiply that by three creepy murders and one gross foot, carry the—”

“In here, both of you,” the detective swings open the interrogation room door and practically tosses Snotlout inside with a firm grip on his upper arm. He ushers Astrid after him with a dash more patience, and then shuts the two of them in with Ruffnut. The sound proofing doesn’t go both ways, because Astrid can clearly hear the thud and squeak of Eretson stomping down the hallway in motorcycle boots that clash with Snotlout’s shined shoes even through a wall.

“Apparently if Eretson is in a bad mood, I get interrogated for being bad at math,” Snotlout stands by the table instead of sitting and Astrid stares at the stack of chairs in the corner, willing herself to get one.

The one-way mirror on the unfamiliar interrogation room wall sends chills up the back of her neck,
triggering her rarely used flight response. There’s no fighting this, the lock on the door clicked automatically when it shut, and the looming feeling verges on oppressive.

“Why would he be in a bad mood?” Ruffnut snorts, “we’ve been having such a stimulating conversation.” She wiggles unperturbed eyebrows at Astrid and points to a bicep, mouthing something like ‘oh my God’.

“You realize you’re a murder suspect right now, right?” The shrill edge introducing itself into Astrid’s voice echoes off of the silent, watching walls.

“And that I’m right here,” Snotlout flexes anyway, his voice tight.

“All of you,” the door opens and Eretson shoves Hiccup and Tuffnut inside before turning and blocking Grisly in the doorway. “Not you.”

“How can I aid in the investigation if you shut me out of the interrogation?”

“Like he hasn’t been hassling me all day,” Hiccup mumbles, standing easily next to Astrid and twisting to stretch his back. She’d think he was being cavalier too if it weren’t for the straight, steady set of his shoulders and his never still hands hanging placid at his sides.

“Maybe we need some space to do our jobs without your creepy face butting into everything.” Snotlout doesn’t help anything and Eretson’s back stiffens as he forces his hand to relax.

“Shut up, Jorgenson.” He exhales and turns back to Grisly, white knuckled grip on the edge of the door, “this is still my case, Grisly, and I need the room.” He doesn’t wait for an answer before slamming it shut and this time, the click of the lock is a defensive measure.

“That’s basically what I said,” Snotlout huffs under his breath and Eretson ignores him except for an audible grinding of his teeth as he tosses a thick manila folder down onto the table.

“You,” he points at the twins, “have motive for Gruffnut Thorston’s murder. Jorgenson here has been off duty for every murder—”

“Consider this, maybe they knew if I was on duty, they wouldn’t get away with it—”

“Hiccup here finds the bodies,” Eretson plows forward, ignoring Snotlout’s interruption, “and sometimes takes Astrid, his alibi, along with him.” His sigh is heavy, exhausted, and Astrid hates the feeling of being engulfed by the slow expanse of his words, the truth of them filling every corner of the too small room. “Where’s the connection?”

“It’s The Venerable Grimdouche, obviously—”

“Shut up, Jorgenson!” Eretson starts pulling pictures out of the folder, some of them bloody, some of them blurry. Some of them streaked with sharp lines of glare from the too bright overhead light that must be in the evidence room. “One more sound out of your mouth not in direct answer to one of my questions—”

“But—”

“Sound, Jorgenson, not even word. Sound.” Eretson sits down but doesn’t look any smaller. If anything, he grows, joining his own bulk to the walls surrounding them. “And I’ll arrest you for obstruction of justice.”

Snotlout thinks about that for a second before gritting his teeth and waving Eretson silently on.
“How do you all know each other?”

“Well, Mr. Detective, sir, it all started twenty five years ago when I was a tiny little baby,” Tuffnut starts, “actually technically it starts like twenty-five years plus nine months ago, but I don’t remember that, thank God—”

“We’re twins, obviously,” Ruffnut, as always, caves to rationality only when she’s worried about her brother. “Astrid was my college roommate.”

“And like I said, I met Astrid when she moved into 324 Harbor Road and I was giving a tour to that address,” Hiccup says like he’s rehearsed it so often it’s boring now, a mnemonic device for a test he passed ages ago.

“How did you meet Miss Thorston?” Eretson makes a note and directs his next question at Snotlout in particular, who points silently at his chest and raises an eyebrow. “Do you need me to use shorter words?”

Snotlout’s jaw twitches as his red cheeks verge on purple, “I was just checking you weren’t going to arrest me if I made a sound.”

“Of course not, I asked you a question.”

“I met Ruffnut when I went over to Astrid’s apartment to…” he looks nervously at Hiccup, who shrugs, defeated, and waves Snotlout on, “well, you see, after Astrid learned that Hiccup was giving tours to her house, she started saying it was harassment, and I went over there to cool things down, you know? Let her know that Hiccup is the harmless kind of weirdo, which is still absolutely true, by the way, you think that string bean could kill someone?”

“I’m asking the questions here, Jorgenson.” Eretson turns to Astrid next, looking at her like she’s a panel of wall he’s only recently been told hides a secret passage. “What did you know about your apartment when you moved in?”

“That it was cheap?” Her blood rushes in her ears as she anticipates the next question.

“Were you aware of the Viggo Grimborn connection to that address?”

“Viggo Grimborn?” Tuffnut perks up, “wait, you guys think this has something to do with Viggo Grimborn? Why didn’t you say something?”

“I just did,” Snotlout crosses his arms, “I just said that Venerial Gono—”

“Jorgenson!” Eretson points at the cuffs hanging loose from the corner of the table. “What do you know about Viggo Grimborn, Mr. Thorston?”

“Only everything,” Tuffnut scoffs, “what does Gruffnut have to do with Viggo Grimborn?”

“He was found exactly at the second victim’s murder site,” Hiccup says gently and Astrid feels another jolt telling her to run. “The second victim was at the third site, the first was at the fourth.”

“Alice Roosevelt didn’t die in Berk, everyone who knows anything knows that,” Tuffnut laughs and looks around, surprised no one is laughing with him. “Come on, the secret fourth Grimborn victim? The Bright’s disease connection? Astrid, did you even read the dossier I gave you?”

The dossier.
“Roosevelt?” Eretson is good at his job. He’s competent, as Astrid noticed immediately when he appeared in her hallway, stony faced and professional with a video of her trespassing. It seemed like a good thing then. “Are you suggesting you know something about a theory concerning Theodore Roosevelt, future president of the United States, and the Grimborn murders?” He doesn’t wait for an answer to the question, digging through his folder for a picture near the bottom.

It’s Tuffnut’s binder, the one Astrid hasn’t thought about since she realized she and Hiccup had overheard a murder on their midnight tour. The one she’d given to him as punishment for making her read the Admiral Hiccup Haddock book.

“That’s it!” Tuffnut nods, “I’m so glad it made it to the proper authorities, I’ll assume you’ll get right on the suggested action in Appendix AB, the sweeping of national park memorials?”

“This binder was found at the scene of Jennifer Franklin’s murder.”

“That’s my bad,” Hiccup talks too fast, hands finally flailing, but it’s too late. “Astrid gave it to me when I dropped her off at her house after our tour and then when I was walking back to my place and—you know, found the—I dropped it.”

“I’d like to talk to Miss Hofferson alone for a moment,” Eretson gets up and opens the door, waving out towards the lobby, “the rest of you can wait outside. Give the front desk any updates on your information, we should be about done for today.”

“I’ll stay,” Hiccup volunteers, looking back at Astrid with wide green eyes.

“No, I should,” Snotlout insists, squaring up against Eretson in the doorway, like he’s going to shove his way in, but Astrid shakes her head.

“No, it’s fine, I’ve got it.”

All four of them are still peering through as Eretson closes the door.

“Sit down, Miss Hofferson.”

She takes Ruffnut’s chair and folds her hands on her lap to stop them from shaking.

“I talked to Fishlegs Ingerman,” Eretson starts, frustration melting away from his expression as he finds himself oriented on a new path, “and I’d like to run a timeline of events past you. First, you move into your apartment at 324 Harbor Road, then you’re startled by someone giving a Viggo Grimborn tour past the property. As I learned from Jorgenson tonight, he came by your apartment to protect Mr. Haddock from yet another trespassing charge and at that point, met Miss Thorston.”

“That’s all correct so far,” Astrid nods, torn between letting her mind rush ahead or focusing on every nuance coming out of Eretson’s mouth. Then again, she knows better than anyone that his perspective is the only one that matters now.

“At the Berk Archives, where you work with Mr. Ingerman, you asked him to help you solve the Grimborn murders as a way of stopping the tours.” He drums his fingertips on the table like he’s keeping a beat for his thoughts. “At some point, Mr. Thorston gave you his compiled theory—”

“Dossier.” She doesn’t want to hear the next part but can’t think of how to stall.

“Mr. Haddock took you on a private Grimborn tour on the night of Jennifer Franklin’s murder, there is video evidence placing the two of you near the murder site at the approximate time of the
event, and now I know that the binder found at the scene was until recently in your possession.”
His voice ramps up, more confident than loud and scarier for it, “the only previous evidence for
Mr. Haddock not being at the scene of the crime was that he was walking you home.”

She nods, ‘previous’ floating like a ghost of the situation an hour ago.

“Then, the night of Dave Ralston’s murder, you were not only with Mr. Haddock on the tour you
loathed so much, but you’re his alibi for where he was the hour before his tour, the window of time
in which the murder was committed.”

“Fishlegs was there too.”

Eretson flicks through his notes and his jaw works silently for a second before he looks up at her,
eyes narrowed to read the fine print on her forehead.

“You joined the tour in progress because Mr. Haddock was struggling to keep it moving.”

“I did,” she tells the truth because she doesn’t know what else she’d say. Some detached part of
her is fascinated with this narrative, wondering how else the truth can twist around these moving
benchmarks and warp into an unrecognizable picture.

“Dave Ralston’s foot was mailed from the archives on a day you were working there. Jorgenson
and Mr. Haddock frequented the bar that Gruffnut Thorston had fraudulently bought under your
friend Mr. Thorston’s name. Miss Thorston had been looking for him for months but hadn’t had
any luck tracking him down.”

“Ruffnut put that together herself,” Astrid swallows hard, “she was with Snotlout and he mentioned
something about Gruff’s and she took a risk—”

“They wouldn’t know each other if it weren’t for you. And you were leaving Gruff’s bar when
you discovered Gruffnut Thorston’s body.” Eretson slides a picture across the table then. A
picture of an alley with a disjointed body and blonde dreadlocks smeared across bloody concrete.

Astrid’s nose is numb as she looks steadily at the detective, “all of that is circumstantial and
beyond that, none of it is forensic.”

“I’ll be in touch,” he stands up and opens the door, waving her through with frosty professionalism,
“it’d be best for you to stay in town.”

The twins are nowhere to be seen, but Hiccup and Snotlout are talking by the front door. Snotlout
sees Astrid first and taps Hiccup’s arm, nudging him to look up. Astrid forces her chin up at their
instant worry, swallowing hard against the paralyzing fear trying to well in her throat. She’s not
scared of people or places or things, but institutions are different. Institutions built on ideas that
are grounded by fear.

It doesn’t feel particularly strong to be scared of fear right now.

“Hey, what’s up?” Hiccup rests his hands on her upper arms and rubs like he thinks she’s cold.
Maybe she is, she definitely doesn’t care right now. “You know, he didn’t have to kick me out of
the room if he wanted to make fun of Snotlout.”

“Apparently being an alibi is actually a kind of a shitty alibi to have,” she sighs and lets Hiccup
pull her sideways against the wall to make room for someone passing.

The crisp footfalls pause, leaving the hallway in eerie silence until Snotlout speaks up, louder for
having been silenced in the interrogation room.

“What do you want, Grisly?”

“Eretson is trying so hard to shut me out,” Grisly shrugs as Astrid turns to face him and the cold hits all at once, “I have to search for my information elsewhere.”

“Right,” Hiccup’s arm lands reassuringly across her shoulders, “you probably didn’t get much from making me look at mutilated corpses all day while describing how they got that way.”

“I mean, he probably got hard,” Snotlout mumbles under his breath and Grisly’s falsely pleasant expression shatters for an instant into a wolfish glare, more starving than his usual malignant patience. “Big weekend plans?”

“I don’t know what conclusions Eretson jumped to, Astrid,” Grisly says her name like a brag, “but rest assured, I’ll set his misgivings straight soon enough.”

“Really? We didn’t bond today?” Hiccup snorts, “you don’t want to chat about our weekends?”

“Well, I’m sure you two will be together,” Grisly laughs, poison dipped nails on a chalkboard, “however young Hiccup here managed to convince you that he’s a good idea.”

“Yeah, we all have eyes, Grisly, we can see she’s way fucking hotter than him,” Snotlout crosses his arms, “Get to a point or go start skinning cats or whatever you do off the clock.”

“Thanks for summing that up,” Hiccup nods at Snotlout and Grisly and then looks at the door, “I’ve had about enough police station for the millennia, how about you?”

“Fair,” she tries not to feel the chilled pinpoints of Grisly’s eyes on her face as she nods, “I just want to go home.”

“Oh,” he lowers his voice and even Snotlout has the social grace to look away, but Grisly’s still listening, frozen in the hallway with his gray uniform casting all of the walls into grayscale, “I was thinking, given the circumstances it might make more sense for you to come back to my place.”

“Given the circumstances,” she parrots, tone dull like ‘dossier’ interrupting Eretson’s interrogation. “I’m not scared to be at my place, Hiccup. It’s not like the locks haven’t been updated since eighteen-eighty-three.”

Astrid has never been one to swerve. Swerving implies losing control somewhere between this course and the next one. Astrid pivots. She finds one thing she trusts to stay still, one anchor in an otherwise unwieldy situation and she plants her heel, relying on the friction until she has a new direction.

“I didn’t say you were scared.” Hiccup is scared, she can see it and it makes her want to be stronger. To ground herself even in the midst of all these impossible, too clear theories spinning around in her head.

She told Hiccup that he didn’t seem to have much choice how involved he is in all of this, but maybe that’s not the same for her. Even if it is, she’s not ready to accept that yet.

“I’m fine at my place.” If she knows anything for sure, it’s that swerving is how people fall. “Where are the twins?”

“They’re talking to Johnson about the wrong name on the bar, it’s going to take a while,” Snotlout
interrupts, ushering them away and glaring at Grisly one last time, “let’s ditch the creepy, nosy audience.”

“Oh, Jorgenson?” Grisly calls before Snotlout can get the front door open and he reluctantly turns around. “I talked to your superior officer, we agree it would be best if you were suspended for the remainder of this investigation. I’m sure you understand.”

“What?” Snotlout and Hiccup snap simultaneously.

“Given your friends continued involvement, we can’t risk any leaks. You can turn in your gun and badge at the front desk.” Grisly nods condescendingly before turning and disappearing into a back room.

Snotlout has to stay to fill out paperwork regarding his suspension and Hiccup offers to walk Astrid home, but she can’t accept. Not because she doesn’t want to or because his falsely blasé presence isn’t comforting, that would be easier, but because she has to go find Fishlegs and figure out what he told Eretson.

It’s the truth, of course, just colored wrong and on an edge, like an Enquirer through a standard lens. She doesn’t tell him what happened at the station.

Hiccup texts, making fun of Grisly mostly, and maybe that’s what feels normal enough for Astrid to sleep after checking the deadbolt a third time. In fact, she oversleeps and somewhere between rushing to work and settling into the monotony of sorting through probably useless scraps of paper, she forgets to dwell on every detail of Eretson’s realization. Worse, she starts working through them, trying to see how they fit.

She hates that she’s still thinking about this logically, like she’s studying a case from afar instead of sitting vulnerable in the middle of one. She hates that she doesn’t blame Eretson for the targeted round of questions after her unfortunate circumstances clicked in a room full of suspicious people, all of their connections orbiting around her.

Above all, Astrid resents that she expects handcuffs when someone knocks at her door a little while after she gets home from work.

Her umbrella is still by the door and her hand hovers above the handle as she looks through the peephole.

It’s not Eretson. It’s not handcuffs at all, after yesterday.

It’s Hiccup’s top hat sitting a few inches lower than she’s used to on Snotlout’s head and she forgets the weaponized umbrella and opens the door. He claps his hand over his eyes and she cocks her hip, arms crossed.

“What are you doing?”

“You’re not flashing me or anything, right?” He peeks between his fingers with a shit-eating grin, like he just invented humor with that inane statement and Astrid almost slams the door in his face. “Kidding, geez, I know you’re into the hat, so I was worried it would be like reflex to—”

“Again, with less patience this time, what are you doing?” She sighs, caught between inviting him in and enduring the twitchiness that sets in whenever her front door is open for too long.

“I thought we could hang out,” he holds up a six pack in his hand and she narrows her eyes, scanning his expression. Usually, he doesn’t look much like Hiccup. Not nearly as much as Astrid
looks like her own cousins, anyway, but right now, when he’s worried about her and lying badly about it, the resemblance is obvious.

“You’re here to guard my apartment, aren’t you?” She huffs, “I told you, I’m fine—”

“Yeah, you were really insistent about that at the station,” he rolls his eyes, “made you look super innocent, Astrid, good job. You know who wouldn’t be afraid of a murderer coming to their apartment? Someone who is the murderer.”

She bites the inside of her cheek to hold back a useless, childish retort, but her nostrils still flare with the desire to blurt it out anyway. The standoff lasts until Snotlout breaks eye contact to look over her shoulder into her place and she steps aside.

“Come on in.” She shuts the door behind him and locks it, double checking the deadbolt with practiced fingers. “Was Ruffnut busy or something?” She asks and his shrug is unconvincing as he messes with the top hat on his head. The hat and the curtains are the only things that seem like they belong in the space right now. “Or did Hiccup ask you to keep an eye on me? Because that is such—”

“Hey, Hiccup doesn’t tell me what to do,” Snotlout opens a bottle on the edge of the countertop like he’s never had to worry about a security deposit, but he at least he offers it to her first. She takes it, waving the rest of his explanation on. “And Eretson is a pompous, tall dickhead who thinks he knows everything, but all of this creepy shit has been happening nights when I’m off duty.”

“I thought you were suspended,” she swallows back her flippant tone as soon as his face falls, “not— that’s not the same as off duty, that’s all.”

“No, suspended with pay is different than being off duty, since I’m suspended without pay it’s the same thing.” he opens another beer and grumbles under his breath, “if I’d shot someone on accident, keep the money coming, but make friends with Hiccup’s new, equally unlucky girlfriend…”

“If you were just going to get suspended anyway, maybe you should have vouched for Ruffnut when it mattered.”

He shakes his head, like he has grounds to be disappointed in her. “Oh, you mean before you came from behind and took the top suspect spot?” He says plainly and she appreciates the candor. “And I was serious, it would be kind of shitty for me to act as a witness here, especially because I was with her when some psycho gutted Gruffnut.”

“You couldn’t have just said that she wasn’t actually threatening him?” She fiddles with the soggy corner of her beer bottle’s label.

“Not in uniform,” he sighs, “not knowing what she’d do to convince me say something like that if she was the psycho who gutted Gruffnut.”

“She’s not.”

“I know that,” he scowls, “and Eretson knows that and he’ll find something that doesn’t make me one of those crooked cops who can be sucked off—“

“I don’t need to know that,” Astrid hits him again with less intent this time.

“I never get any appreciation for trying to do the right thing.”
“Why should you?” She frowns, “yet. Maybe I’ll appreciate your…near decency later when everything’s done turning out ok.”

“Right, like it’ll take that long before I do something heroic and win you over.” He winks and it’s all wrong under the brim of Hiccup’s hat.

“So you came over here to befriend me?” She raises an eyebrow, leaning back against her only chair and crossing her ankles. Having him here is comfortable enough for her to prod the conversation along. Not necessarily familiar, but better than being alone and jumping at every creak outside her door.

“I already told you, you’re my bro by extension.” He’s too sincere, which makes it awkward that they’ve discovered murder victims and been suspects together. “Plus, if we’re going get this friend-group going without Eretson tagging along or Ruffnut…” The sincerity deepens, uncomfortable, and Astrid bites back an apology on Ruff’s behalf. “Anyway, we’ve got to form cross-group bonds.”

“Right,” she nods, “for the good of the friend-group. That’s what I’m really concerned about right now.”

“Why do you think I’m taking this upon myself?” The bravado is back as he leans back against her counter, taking off Hiccup’s hat and twirling it on his finger. “You and Hiccup have been so preoccupied being Virgin Gorgonzola nerds—”

“Virgin Gorgonzola?”

“The first creepy killer guy, whatever, I don’t listen to any of the shit Hiccup says about him.” Snotlout is purposefully stupid in a way Astrid could never manage, even when it would have been convenient or even kind.

“Let me get this straight, you’re saying Hiccup and I are too preoccupied with Viggo Grimborn,” she enunciates carefully and he rolls his eyes, “and it’s bad for this ‘friend-group’ concept you keep mentioning?”

“It’s what he did with Heather,” Snotlout pauses and Hiccup’s hat tilts to one side, “you’ve met Heather, right? Black hair, really hot, works at the geeky bar where Hiccup’s weirdo tours start?” Something in her expression must prompt him to rephrase because he continues, “not that you’re not hot, you’re super hot, it’s just different kinds of hot. She’s like ‘stab me when I’m not looking, and I have no idea what I did’ hot and you’re like ‘punch me in the face in public and I know exactly what I did’ hot.”

She doesn’t expect to laugh, but that’s the first statement she hasn’t had to take seriously in what feels like forever.

“Not sure what that says about you, but thanks, I guess.” She weighs that and wrinkles her nose, “maybe I get you and Ruffnut a little more now.”

“Whatever, that’s not what we’re talking about,” he scowls at the new mention of Ruffnut, “when Hiccup was first starting to give his tours he met Heather and it was nice until Hiccup was too obsessed with Grimborn,” he says it right, pointedly humoring her, “to notice that Heather had a raging crush on him and everything got weird.”

“Didn’t Heather steal his research?” The concept of Heather having a crush on Hiccup settles off-kilter in Astrid’s stomach. Like that time Snotlout gave her a ride home after the second body was
discovered, she feels silly to care about kisses and insignificant little spikes of jealousy when people are dying, but she can’t help it.

“Right, his research,” Snotlout quotes with an outturned pinky, holding his beer like he’s ready for tea with the queen. “Is that what you’re after? His research?” The protective but still suggestive way that Snotlout asks the question is perversely sweet, like he’s a doting chaperone who cares more about Hiccup than the concept of virtue.

“I can do my own research,” she diverts diplomatically and Snotlout frowns.

“I was using research as slang for di—”

“I’m aware of that,” she cuts him off, “I just don’t really think it’s any of your business.”

“You’d think that, but given our apartment’s thin old walls, I’ve heard plenty. None of it complaining.” He raises his beer in a toast five feet away from her and she wonders how shame is distributed among people and how Snotlout’s got lost. “Not that I’d listen to a friend on purpose, that’s a dick move.” His expression is more conciliatory than apologetic, offering to take honest responsibility for his delivery without promising to change.

The first time she met Snotlout, she felt a flash of kinship, because he cleans up after Hiccup the way she does after Ruffnut. His acceptance that he’s some shade of asshole deepens it further because lately she’s been struggling to walk the tight-rope between black and white.

“It might be easier for us to be friends if you weren’t so involved in my hypothetical sex life.”

“No,” he doesn’t even pause to think about that suggestion, “it’s way easier to try and get Hiccup laid than it is to come to terms with being friends with such a nerd.”

“Hey!” She looks for something to throw at him and settles for a box of tissues on her crooked coffee table.

“Don’t spill the beer—”

A dull, sure knock in the courtyard reverberates through the old, heavy window, the sound dodging through pulled back curtains and stalling Astrid’s laughter in her throat.

“And you said you weren’t scared,” Snotlout snorts, tone light but face serious as he goes to look out the window, shoulders stiff to fill a uniform he’s not wearing. “Oh shit, that’s probably the pizza I ordered, looks like the outside door is locked.”

“That door’s unlocked until ten,” she tries to shake off the startled tremor in her chest, “and you ordered a pizza? How’d you know I was even going to let you in?”

“I had the hat,” he puts the top hat back on his head, “I’ll go get it.”

She’s not scared. She’s balking like a horse who won’t cross a frozen river, caught between fear and stubbornness. She should offer to go with him, but that would be admitting it’s a two-person job to collect a pizza from the front door and she’s been too righteous to back down now.

The only thing worse than being scared is getting used to it, adapting to it, living with it like a roommate she never wanted.

“Sure,” she nods and the knock echoes again, the sound magnified by the narrow hallway as Snotlout opens the front door.
“Don’t worry, if it’s the murderer I’ll just bore them to death with my Hiccup impression,” he tips the top hat at her with a nasal ‘milady’ on the way out.

Outside, it looks like the pizza guy is giving up, disappearing behind the ‘Al, I. Safe’ wall on the way. Snotlout sees him though, jogging to catch up, the hat casting a long shadow in the sallow circle of the street light. There’s a pause just long enough for her to feel stupid.

The door is old, it probably locked behind Snotlout or was stuck shut with some mud and the pizza guy didn’t want to yank on it. She really needs to stop jumping at every little sound, especially given that she knows the other murders respected modern structures. They weren’t in the condos, they were out back at approximated locations. Hell, even if some crazy person is targeting her place, it’s more likely there’ll be a body in the courtyard.

The courtyard is hardly even her place. It’s her building, her sphere, sure, but off-center.

The sudden pop is so loud it rattles the window and Astrid flinches, sure the glass is about to shatter. The second pop comes before she has time to breathe or think or restart her heart.

Gunshots don’t echo like fireworks do.

Gunshots pulse, singular jolts of force against the wall of air, shifting reality a meaningful increment where fireworks just fizz and pop, making a scene for no reason at all. Gunshots echo off of old courtyard walls like flickers of remembered violence, and the throbbing leaves the pause between Astrid’s heartbeats feeling like dead silence.

She grabs the umbrella and runs outside.
Chapter 18

Before the condos went in, the East side of Downtown Berk was five generations of tacky all stacked together in narrow, street-facing Victorian buildings. The factories and lodging houses were mostly converted into apartments during the first world war, when Berk’s harbor was necessary to the war effort and suddenly people could regularly afford more than nightly rent. Then prohibition took effect and internal bathrooms were hidden to act as stills, speakeasies like Gruff’s used to be were nestled inconspicuously into the mouths of alleys, adding to the city center’s labyrinth. The depression brought back the web of shantytowns that again depleted for the war effort.

The forties and fifties brought back growth, but it stayed inside for the most part, those valanced rectangular windows looking in on mid-century modifications returning fifty-year-old lofts back to the open floor plan they’d had as workhouse accommodations. Cars replaced buggies and the weekly markets became grocery stores. The sixties and seventies meant avocado green refrigerators and shag carpet, and people ran cable through tight nooks in the old brick walls or mounted satellite dishes to sloped roofs.

By the eighties, things started to slow down, between the commercial fishing lane closing due to pollution and the particle board monstrosities down south gradually becoming more affordable than the city. That’s when Hiccup’s dad started on the force, clearing out squatters and enforcing the rules as the government turned some of the less historical buildings into public housing. The nineties were quieter, the streets respecting Stoick Haddock’s vast influence enough to stay clean.

Then Berk University got ahead of the dot-com bubble and an influx of college students started filling up cheap housing. And then they had the money not to waste time winding fiberoptic cable through a hundred years of walls built with no concept of building code, so they started building from the ground up, rewriting a city that had always embraced edits.

Hiccup stares up at the condo façade from the sidewalk in front of it, eyes following crisp white trim against pastel panels. The balconies above him are covered in houseplants and bikes that are necessitating the city’s replacement of old cobblestone in favor of asphalt bike lanes. The windows are double paned and soulless, their locks visible from four stories down.

“Hiccup?” A voice startles him from his architectural roast: urban condo edition, and he whips around to see Ruffnut, dressed for an office and holding an envelope in one hand. He’d warn her against walking alone at dusk, but they’re far enough from Astrid’s apartment that it doesn’t matter.

That and it would be a really creepy thing to say, so he’s glad he stopped himself.

“Hey, Ruff,” he looks between her and the door to the complex, “do you live here? Or…”

“Right,” she snorts, “I pay my rent with the family gold.”

“Oh, I figured,” he gestures at a sign advertising new units, starting in the mid eight-hundreds, “paying that much for a cardboard shoebox must be so reasonable for you with your connections.”

“All my connections, sure, a bunch of Gruffnuts.” She smacks her leg with the envelope and lowers her voice, “apparently the copy of the deed with Tuffnut’s signature forged on it was illegally downloaded at this address a couple of weeks ago.”
Hiccup’s eyes twitch automatically to the Neighborhood Watch Force seal engraved on the main door above a phone number and the number for a main office suite in the building. It would make sense if Grisly was the one to send the deed to the twins, especially since it was the only thing connecting Tuffnut to Gruff’s murder. And if Tuffnut hadn’t been connected, he wouldn’t have been questioned, and he never would have recognized the dossier, which connects the entire case back to Astrid.

Yes, it’s another whole basket of leaps adding onto Hiccup’s probable bushel of leaps at this point, but the dark hole that settles in his stomach when Grisly says Astrid’s name is as solid as the flat poured, brand new sidewalk he’s standing on.

He just needs something, a scrap of evidence that’s probably obvious in unit 110 of this exact building.

“Oh,” he tries to sound distracted, bored even, “so you’re looking into that?”

“I guess not,” she sighs, “I was expecting one of Gruffnut’s sleazy friends’ house or something. Anyone affording this place surely has something better to do than rip off my brother.”

“Maybe it’s someone working here,” Hiccup shrugs, “I mean think about it, the Neighborhood Watch Force office is here and they probably have all sorts of access after partnering with the police.”

“Why are you here?” Ruffnut raises an eyebrow, not as easy to lead as Hiccup had originally hoped.

She’s Astrid’s friend though, she saw how uncharacteristically addled Astrid was when Eretson wanted her alone.

“Hear me out,” he pauses until she nods him along, “ok, so I think Grisly has something to do with all of this.”

“Grisly?” She frowns, “the silver fox at the precinct with the unfortunate twin kink?”

“Huh?”

“The guy in gray.” The shake of her head is pointedly disgusted in him for his lack of vision, “with the Russian accent.” She waits for him to catch up, “you think he killed Gruffnut?”

“Not in so many words,” Hiccup winces, “or maybe—it’s just a feeling, but after yesterday with Eretson—”

“What is up with the cops around here, by the way?” She grins like he’s not the wrong audience to admire Snotlout’s biceps with. “Anyway, whatever, get to your point.”

“I already did. I think Grisly has some kind of influence or part in what’s going on.” He bites his lip before continuing, hoping he found the right company to say this. It’s something he would have said to Heather, back when she cared about the discovery of it all, but he can’t say that even she would have really gone along with it. Investigating a very much inhabited building with a security force is different than a boarded-up basement no one would buy because of the grotesque murder committed in it a century ago. “And I’m trying to figure out how to check out his office.”

“So you hop right from a hunch to breaking and entering?” She folds the envelope and tucks it into her pocket.
“After yesterday, Eretson thinks Astrid has something to do with the murders, and that’s entirely my fault.”

“Did you bring a lock pick or black spray paint or pantyhose or are we just doing this?” Ruffnut rubs her hands together and looks at the doors.

“Pantyhose?” He snorts, “I was going for more of a modern leg-line—wait, we?” He looks at her surprised and she shrugs.

“You’re crazy, I like crazy, I’m in. And it’s for Astrid.” She takes a step forward, “plus, if your hunch is right, maybe we can figure out who printed out this deed. Is the door locked?”

“I haven’t checked,” Hiccup points at the hours listed on the glass, “it says it closes at six though, and I don’t like the ‘appointment only’ in the fine print.”

Just then a woman walks mostly past the inside of the doors then freezes, squinting out at them and cracking the door to peek her head out. She has an ID badge around her neck and reading glasses pushed up onto her graying hair.

“Are you the Bensons?”

“Bensons?” Ruffnut asks.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I’m waiting for a young couple who applied for a condo online, but I guess that’s not you. Sorry!”

“N—”

“Yes,” Ruffnut cuts Hiccup off, her tone surprisingly confident, “that’s us. I’m sorry, I’m not used to the new name yet! Traffic!”

“I heard about that accident on the interstate and assumed you must have been stuck in traffic,” the woman opens the door and gestures them inside, “this shouldn’t take too long though, all the paperwork looks good. I assume you just want to have a look at the place before signing everything.”

“Thank you for accommodating us,” Hiccup looks around as the woman locks up behind them. When Ruffnut catches his eye she shrugs, surprisingly calm through the change in plans.

“Oh, it’s no problem, my office is right over here,” she leads them down a sterile hallway that belongs in a bank or medical center, the walls lined with black and white pictures of the buildings torn down to build this monstrosity.

She opens the door of Unit 130, right next to a shadowed Unit 110 and Hiccup grabs Ruffnut’s elbow to stop her from entering the woman’s office.

“I noticed on the door that Unit 110 is supposed to house the neighborhood security office,” he asks, trying to sound more like a theoretical ‘Benson’, who is apparently buying a condo, than himself, “is it closed at six on a Friday? That doesn’t seem very responsible.” Mr. Benson, the condo buying adult, is very concerned with how responsible people are.

“Oh, Grimmel is in all the time, you’ll see when you move in,” the woman laughs like old ladies do when Snotlout helps them across the street, “he introduces himself to all of our new residents as Mr. Grisly and acts all tough, but don’t worry, he warms up quick and everything has been so much quieter around here since he started.”
“Quieter?” Hiccup follows the woman into her office and sits down next to Ruffnut in the chairs on the other side of her desk, “what do you mean by that?”

“Given that you checked for security, I’m sure you’ve heard all those stories about how this used to be a bad part of town,” she rolls her eyes, “that was ages ago, we’ve really cleaned it up around here. Most people in the building work nearby, it’s a real community of young urban professionals like yourselves.” She pushes a stack of papers towards them and starts flipping through, “when was the wedding again?”

“The wedding?” Hiccup squawks and looks at Ruffnut, who has produced a ring and slid it onto her left ring finger since he last looked at her.

“Oh, it was just two months ago,” she winds her fingers through Hiccup’s and he freezes. He was just lying to get in the building, he didn’t think he’d end up in someone’s office in front of real estate papers, much less holding Astrid’s best friend’s hand while she’s wearing a mysteriously obtained ring.

Is this binding if Mr. Benson has to sign anything?

“Newlyweds,” the woman shakes her head affectionately and Hiccup nods, letting his eyes dart to the corners to check for security cameras. He doesn’t see any, but he didn’t see Grisly’s camera on the midnight tour either. “Oh! I just remembered, there’s one blank your income information that’s not quite filled out.” She points a manicured finger at a blank line labeled ‘Title’ above a number for income that Hiccup definitely doesn’t make in a decade. Maybe pretending to be the responsible Mr. Benson has some merit. “We just need your title to double check with the company.”

“Oh that’s my honey-pants,” Ruffnut coos, “he’s so modest, he just got a promotion and doesn’t like to brag.”

“Well, it’s not bragging when you report that number for taxes,” the woman rolls her eyes and stands up, “while you finish these up, I’ll go get the keys to the place. They just got the new backsplash in and it looks amazing.”

“Sounds great!” Ruffnut says too enthusiastically and the office door shuts, leaving them in silence.

“What the hell was that?” Hiccup disentangles his hand from hers, “and where’d you get that ring?”

“It’s fake,” she looks at her hand, “or mostly fake, it’s for emergencies.”

“Right, most emergencies can be dealt with by pretending to be married, of course.” He deadpans, looking back at the door, “we should go, this isn’t working.”

“You’re giving up on our marriage after only two months? I didn’t take you for a quitter when I said those vows—”

“Ruff—”

“On a beach in Mexico and Snotlout and Eretson were both groomsmen and their rented formal speedos matched the color of the Caribbean.” She grins at him and he sighs, looking across the desk and trying to think.

There’s a key ring right in front of the woman’s chair, a tag on it clearly labelled ‘Benson’, and he takes it, tossing it up and down in his palm.
“While you happen to be describing my dream wedding, and we should talk centerpieces later, I have a better plan.” He lets the keyring dangle from his finger, “obviously, these aren’t in the condo. And even more obviously, she can’t see very well since she missed them on the desk right in front of her.”

“That’s not a plan, Sherlock Condo.”

“Funny,” Hiccup hides the keys in his pocket when he sees the woman coming back down the hallway, “just follow my lead, alright?”

“As long as it’s clear that I wear the pants in this relationship,” Ruffnut grabs a handful of his ass and squeezes just as the door opens. “We can’t wait to see the place, right honey-buns?”

“So excited!” His voice cracks and the woman looks suspiciously at Ruffnut’s arm.

“I was sure I left the keys up there, but I must have brought them down,” she starts sifting through the biggest drawer behind her desk and Hiccup makes his move, edging out of Ruffnut’s reach on the way.

“Here! I’ll help,” he purposefully fumbles the stack of papers they were just signing, sending loose leaf and a pile of knick-knacks all over the floor. “Oh no! I’m so sorry!”

“He’s a real klutz,” Ruffnut explains as Hiccup kneels down and starts spreading the mess, “outside of the bedroom, if you know what I mean.”

“I’m sure she does, babe, you’re not really being subtle about it,” his laugh barely forces through gritted teeth, “can you get down here and help me?”

“Oh, you two don’t have to do that,” the woman finally kneels down herself, squinting to try and make sense of the purposefully thorough mess. She reaches out to pick up a small sculpture obviously made by a child and her glasses fall off, onto the ground by Hiccup’s knees.

“Here, I’ll get those for you!” He announces, reaching at the same time as she does and barely beating her. Their hands tangle as she pulls the glasses back towards her face and he makes the move, fumbling with the snap holding the ID card onto her lanyard.

“That’s where I left those!” She finally puts the glasses on and Hiccup quickly shoves the ID behind his back, relaxing slightly when Ruffnut takes it. “I’ve been looking for my glasses all day and they were on top of my head the whole time.”

“I hate when I do that,” Hiccup shakes his head and stands up, trying not to flinch when Ruffnut grabs his ass again. This time she leaves more than claw marks behind though and he feels the access card in his back pocket.

“You’d lose your head if it wasn’t bolted on, dear,” she laughs, patting the back of his pants and he jumps.

“Let me go check the condo again,” the woman points at her glasses, “I might have better luck finding the keys, I’ll be right back.”

“Sounds great!” Hiccup nods.

“I’ll clean up his mess,” Ruffnut whispers on one side of her hand, like she’s telling a secret, “it’s what I’m best at. Men, right?” As soon as the door is shut again, Hiccup takes a big step away from her and she nods to herself, “that went well.”
"You kept grabbing my ass!" He whisper yells, cracking the door to check the hallway. It’s still empty and Ruffnut slips out behind him.

"We got the key, didn’t we?"

"I’m dating—well, we haven’t said the word, but I—Astrid, in case you didn’t remember." He holds his breath as he presses the key card to the sensor next to the doorframe.

It turns green and he turns the doorknob slowly, half expecting a booby trap or Mr. Grisly sitting in the corner in a swivel chair that turns around right as he flicks on the light. His hand hovers over the switch for a second before he thinks better of it. The light would be too obvious from the hallway, anyway.

"I’m Astrid’s best friend,” Ruffnut scoffs, hurrying Hiccup into the office so they can get out of the hallway, ‘I’m quality control.’

"I’m sure Astrid can do that herself,” he lets his eyes adjust, glad to see the empty desk chair in the corner. When he’s sure he won’t instantly trip and announce himself, he creeps over to the computer, waking up the monitor and quickly dimming the screen as far as it’ll go.

"So she’s done her own inspection then?” Ruffnut crouches down next to him, wiggling eyebrows tinged blue by the generic background.

"Clues, Ruff,” he points at a filing cabinet, “we’re looking for clues.”

"I’m just fake married to you and you’re a nag,” she sneaks over to the cabinet and opens the top drawer. “It’s empty, there’s nothing here.”

"We’ve been here all of two minutes,” he frowns, scrolling through empty file after empty file. He checks the drive and no storage is taken up aside from operating system and installed programs.

"Who would keep their evidence in a room that Glasses the Idiot could access?” She scoffs, “hell, who doesn’t lock their computer?”

"Someone who’s not using it,” he sighs, “you’re right. It’s an office but he clearly doesn’t do anything here.”

"Guess some rich asshole upstairs illegally downloaded the deed to Gruff’s,” Ruffnut wipes her hands on her pants and points at the door. “Should we get out of here before Glasses comes back?”

"I wonder if there’s a way to get a residence list,” Hiccup glances at the empty printer on the desk and gets an idea. “Let me check the printer ink levels to see if he’s been using it.”

"Hiccup, there’s nothing here,” Ruffnut grabs the back of his collar and yanks, ignoring his sudden choking sound.

"At least let me shut the monitor off,” he fumbles for the button just as a voice pipes up in the hallway.

"Grimmel!” There’s just enough light for him to see Ruffnut’s nervous expression before he clicks it off.

"If you’ll excuse me Ms. Moore,” the accented voice is lighter than usual, more alive through the door than it was across an interrogation room, even over hours of gory discussion, “I’m in a bit of a hurry. I’ve got a rather time sensitive clean-up on my plate at the moment.”
“Just a second, if you have it, I’m just about to show two new residents—lovely young couple—their place and they were asking about your hours.”

“I’m afraid I’ll have to catch them another time, Ms. Moore,” Grisly’s too bright voice draws her name out as the handle to the office half turns, and Hiccup doesn’t think, he just grabs Ruffnut’s arm and pulls her under the desk with him. It won’t do much if he sits down to check e-mail, but it’s better than nothing.

“The Bensons, I think they’re really going to like it here, they’re just in my office—Hello?” Glasses’s voice dulls slightly like she’s in the destroyed office next door.

The opening line of ‘I Shot the Sheriff’ pours out of Hiccup’s phone and he swears, yanking it out of his pocket and declining Snotlout’s call as quickly as he can.

“You have your ringtone on?” Ruffnut hisses, “do you know what year it is?”

“It’s Snotlout, he thinks it’s funny,” Hiccup shuts his phone off entirely and waits, wincing at the sound of his own breathing.

“Ms. Moore,” Grisly says as he opens the door, his accent crackling with some of its usual chill electrified, “I’m afraid we’ll have to continue this conversation another time.” He steps into the office and shuts the door across any further attempts at conversation. He mumbles something in Russian that Hiccup is confident calling an insult by tone alone and turns on the light.

In the dark, Hiccup didn’t notice the small sink against the opposite wall, but the sound of the faucet and Grisly’s creepily happy humming as he starts to wash his hands gives Ruffnut a chance to whisper.

“What are we going to do?”

“I’ll distract him, you make a run for it?” He offers and Ruffnut rolls her eyes, too comfortable hunched under the desk mid-trespass.

“If anyone’s distracting him, it should be me.”

The sink turns off but Grisly keeps humming, turning slightly so that if Hiccup peeks just barely around the tangle of computer cords, he can see that Grisly is holding something. Wiping something down maybe, from the scrap of cloth he throws away before he sets whatever it is in a drawer that he locks with a key from the ring on his belt.

Then Grisly wipes his hands with another wipe from a Clorox can, like a germophobic Bond villain in a lair far more grandiose than the security office at a poorly built condo development.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” he hisses, double checking his cuff under his pant leg in case he has to run. Not that it’ll help much, not with catching Grisly suspiciously pleased with himself as he turns the sink back on and starts scrubbing his hands again.

“Follow my lead,” Ruffnut stands up from under the desk, leaning back against the printer and pressing its power button so that it lurches to life with a screech and a series of clicks. Grisly turns around, a flash of shock humanizing his features for a brief second as he stares at her, too stunned to check under the desk. “Hey Sailor,” Ruff greets in a pointedly husky voice, one hip cocked.

“How did you get in here?” Grisly stomps across the room and grabs Ruffnut by the arm, which only makes her grin wider.
“Does that matter?” She twirls the end of her hair in her free hand, pointing at the door with her
chin as she bites her lip.

Hiccup takes the chance, sliding out from under the desk as quietly as he can and slipping around
the corner, staying low like he anticipates a velociraptor in pursuit.

“What are you doing in my office?” Grisly sounds as addled as Hiccup has ever heard him and he
freezes, trying to figure out how to get Ruffnut out along with him.

But with Snotlout suspended, Hiccup doesn’t know how he’d get away with trespassing, so he
leaves that problem to five seconds from now Hiccup, sneaking a cautious arm up to the doorknob.

“Are you asking what we’re doing now or what I intend for us to do?” Ruffnut laughs, “because
right now we’re just standing here and you’re kind of yelling at me, which could be hot if your
breath didn’t stink so much. Wait, I think I have gum!”

Grisly yells, inarticulate in his frustration, and Hiccup opens the door just enough to slip through,
popping to his feet and cushioning the sound as it closes behind him. He makes for the back door
to avoid Ms. Moore’s office, swearing under his breath at his phone when it takes what feels like
forever to power back on. Every second that passes without more than yelling from Grisly’s office
feels more tense and more miraculous and by the time he’s outside, it feels like his head is going to
explode with it.

“Come on, come on,” he whispers at the phone, trying not to give into the guilt that’s prodding him
to run back inside. He can’t help Ruffnut if he’s caught too.

The back door to the building opens again and he freezes, looking around for something to hide
behind but seeing nothing but an empty alley. He waits Grisly’s enraged, split glacier face to
emerge but instead, it’s Ruffnut.

“You’re ok!” He grabs her hand and yanks her down the alley next to him, not pausing until they’re
out on the street among a few straggling commuters. “How’d you get out of there?”

“Irritated him, mostly,” she shrugs, obviously proud of herself, “I figured he wouldn’t think anyone
was trespassing for information if he thought a crazy stalker—in this case me—was trespassing to
make a move on him.”

“That’s—that’s actually kind of smart.” Hiccup realizes he’s talking way too loud and starts
walking, head ducked down like he learned ages ago for exiting alleyways incognito, “I don’t
know why it worked, but it did, and that’s what matters.”

“Are you going to get your phone?” Ruffnut asks and only then does Hiccup realize it’s vibrating.

“Shit, yeah,” he stops and frowns at the screen. Berk United Hospital. He doesn’t think he owes
the hospital anything, Snotlout’s insurance is pretty good, so he usually keeps up on those bills.
“Hello?”

“Hi, I’m calling from the Berk United Trauma Ward, can I speak to Hiccup Haddock please?”

“Y-yeah,” he stutters, tongue suddenly too big for his mouth, “you are, I mean I’m him. What’s
going on?”

“You’re listed as Snotlout Jorgenson’s emergency contact,” the voice on the other end dips,
somber like nurses get when the news isn’t good, “he’s just been brought in.”
“Is he ok?” Hiccup asks when the voice doesn’t automatically explain, dizzy as he leans back against the nearest wall.

“What’s wrong?” Ruffnut mouths and Hiccup shakes his head.

“Are you able to come to the hospital now?” The voice asks gently, “it’s urgent.”

“Yeah, I—on my way.”

Hiccup knows hospital calls. He knows how nurses sound when they’re underpaid and overworked, how they sound the first time they call about a bill and the fifth. He knows appointment calls and rescheduling calls, because over the years he’s had hundreds.

He’s only had one urgent call and he knows it better than the rest. He knows it like he knows blood on pavement and the way even his dad looked smaller on a gurney, surrounded by machines that were still clicking off to rest before their next, hopefully more successful, use.

Ruffnut must get him a ride because he doesn’t do anything, he barely feels himself walking and then he’s standing in front of the check-in desk at the emergency room, his own hands recognizably pale and waxy on the counter. The nurse looks up and her eyes widen, and Hiccup realizes he’s shaking like he’s the patient. That snaps him out of it enough, because he doesn’t want anyone focusing on him right now, not when it could matter.

Unless it doesn’t anymore.

Unless that was the last time Snotlout would ever call him and he declined it, because he was doing something stupid, because he wasn’t where he should have been. Again.

Urgent calls don’t end well in his experience. Urgent calls end with his dad’s blood-stained wallet in a plastic basket, staring down at a beardless picture on a drivers’ license and wondering if he ever knew the man at all.

“Can I help you, sir?” The nurse behind the desk asks and he shrugs.

“I’m not really sure,” he swallows hard. He has to ask the yes or no question that’s wedged in his throat like it’s trying to shelter him from the answer by cutting off oxygen. One answer is the exact opposite of helping.

“Do you need to sit down?” She stands up, reaching out like she thinks she’s going to have to catch him and he exhales slowly.

“I just got a call about Snotlout Jorgenson?” He asks slowly, each word taking up its allotted measure of breath and leaving him with an empty chest that’s still not big enough for his pounding heart.

“I’ll look him up.” The keyboard clicks are deafening, each tap removing a barrier between Hiccup and the truth he doesn’t think he wants yet.

He thinks of the apartment and how empty it was before Snotlout moved in. That bedroom full of his dad’s things he didn’t want to look at, in case they belonged to a stranger. He remembers how it felt like the sound of his chewing echoed off of the empty walls, like he was living in a museum that regarded him as an impermanent exhibit, moving around hallways until he realized he didn’t belong.

“The Trauma Unit desk is on the second floor, the elevator is just down the hallway to your right.”
The nurse’s face is urgent now, formal in that way doctors are when they have bad news they need to be inhumanly calm about.

“Yes or no?” Hiccup asks, hands shaking again as he stands away from the desk and runs his hand through his hair. “Do you know and just can’t tell me?”

“I’m sorry, sir,” the words squeeze his heart in a vice that lets go too quickly when the sentence continues, “you’ll have to talk to someone at the desk upstairs.”

“Ok,” he walks towards the elevator before he keeps talking, because the urge to remind the nurse that his dad was on the first floor is overwhelming. His dad was on the first floor in a room near the back with a window looking out on where the cannery used to be before someone tore it down and built a motel. If they’re going to make an urgent call, they should do it right.

Hiccup follows the signs towards trauma, vaguely aware that his quest is a little ironic as his mind flicks again and again through what a day would be like without Snotlout. Another room full of things he can’t look at, this time because he knows too well who they’ll wish he was instead. He was with Snotlout when he got his driver’s license. He grew out that stupid moustache for it. He had the moustache in his academy graduation photo too, like polyester lint from his brand-new uniform stuck to his lip.

“Hiccup?”

Hearing his name makes him realize that he’s frozen again, ten feet back from the desk he’s been looking for, it’s helpful little sign reading ‘trauma’ like a lemonade stand banner advertising some neighborhood kid’s wares. The tile between his feet and the rubberized rug in front of the desk stretch and warp in his brain and he distracts himself, looking for whoever talked to him.

Astrid is handcuffed to a chair in the waiting room, her face pale and sallow and at odds with her determined expression. And he doesn’t have room to wonder why she’s here or why she’s cuffed, because the tiles between where he’s standing and her chair shrink, gravity shifting and pulling him towards her. He flops into the chair next to her, twice as heavy and half as graceful as usual as he throws his arms around her shoulders and buries his face in her neck.

“Hey,” she says like he’s a dog shaking in a thunderstorm, uncuffed hand rubbing his back, “did the doctor call you? I left my phone at my place so I couldn’t call—”

“Is he…yes or no?” He swallows hard and pulls back from the hug just enough to see her eyes, tensing at the sudden wave of trust that smacks him. She’ll tell him the truth, even if it’s hard, even if it doesn’t help, and for a second, he wishes he could let go of her rather than hear it, but he crossed that bridge a long time ago.

The second he handed her his Admiral Haddock book, he resigned himself to her most honest assessment, he just didn’t know it would matter so much.

“I don’t think it’s that simple,” she shakes her head, “he’s in surgery. I haven’t heard anything because Eretson cuffed me to this fucking chair.”

“He’s still in surgery,” Hiccup repeats to affirm it, waiting for her to say it’s a joke and trusting her too much for that at the same time. “It’s urgent but he’s still in surgery?”

“He was shot twice, Hiccup,” her voice is matter of fact but her hand on his arm is gentle, “his heart stopped on the way over, apparently—”

“So he is dead?” He shudders, “he’s an organ donor, he always said someone would be really lucky
to get his organ someday—"

“Hey,” Astrid cups his chin, thumb pressed to his lips to shut him up, “he’s in surgery, that’s all I know.”

“That doesn’t help,” his laugh is fragile and he lets go of her to rub his hands over his face, elbows on his knees. “When they said it was urgent I expected an answer, that’s not an answer.”

“It’s not,” she agrees, yanking futilely at her handcuff a couple of times before stretching her other hand over to rest it on his back. “Not yet, anyway.”
Chapter 19

Eretson works like someone who knows the goalposts will be shifted by the time that he gets there, but he sees it as a challenge, rather than a guarantee of failure. Maybe his ceaseless, determined flipping through pages and pictures and notes in an untidy, almost childish scrawl would be reassuring if Astrid weren’t still half cuffed to an office chair.

She knows her rights. She hasn’t been arrested officially, just taken in for questioning under a strong and understandable suspicion, and she could demand that he un cuff her or actually arrest her, but then she’d have to decide what to do next.

Her eyes flick to the evidence bag in the middle of Eretson’s cluttered desk, a halo of medical records strewn around it, all of them read twice. The bullet looks harmless now, mushroomed and useless, a relic crusted streaked with long dried blood and scratched by the tools that removed it from the site of its discovery.

Stable.

When they left the hospital, Snotlout was stable, and Hiccup was anything but. Stable still isn’t an answer, it’s not the black and white yes or no that he wanted. She didn’t know what to do but tell him the truth, tethered to the chair, back cramping from twisting to keep her hand on his shoulder as he stared sheathed daggers at the wall.

When her uncle died, it wasn’t sudden. It was months and months of doctors and fighting and planning for the impossible, and she remembers feeling like something was wrong with her when relief hit quicker than grief did. Hiccup took no time at all to shift into the stunned limbo that precedes bad news, like it was a practiced position, a place he was comfortable living until he remembered its inherent timeline.

If she complained about the cuffs now, she could get back to the hospital and be there, if nothing else. Except she doesn’t know if Hiccup is still there or if there’s even a reason to still be there, since her phone is back on the kitchen counter at her apartment. The apartment she was so stubborn to leave until she had to, only to be discovered by Eretson, her sweatshirt a finger in a dam breach that was letting boats through.

If he uncuffed her, she’d have to go back there and face the consequences of clinging to her sunk cost.

Consequences exist even when you don’t face them, of course, but she’d like to think the three in the morning buffer against them exists for more than just a private tour that never should have led to all of this.

“Have you found anything?” She asks when the clock on the wall strikes three thirty, her voice coming out tired even though she doesn’t think she could sleep when she can’t blink without seeing Hiccup’s panicked face or the wall outside her building’s courtyard splattered with blood.

“Huh?” Eretson looks up with bleary eyes, startled like he forgot she was there.

“Have you found anything?” She can’t blame him for bringing her here, given the circumstances, but the brutal silence is absolutely his doing. “Any leads? Did the doctors give you anything?”

He looks at her for a long, exhausted moment, waffling over treating her as a suspect or something else.
“You know, I’d be a pretty shitty murderer if I paused my grand escape to try and stop the bleeding.” It’s the last thing she should say and the only thing she can. Her voice sounds metallic like it did in a hospital hallway, telling Hiccup that for a second, ‘Snotlout Jorgenson’ was a name that would be whispered late at night on the corner by someone in a vintage Tom Brady jersey to set the scene.

“It’s a nine millimeter,” Eretson picks up the evidence bag and stares at the bullet, “police standard issue, but that doesn’t mean anything because anyone could buy a box of the same at any Walmart in this bloody city.”

“So it doesn’t mean anything?” She sighs, slumping down in the uncomfortable chair and trying and failing to find a new part of her butt to sit on. “We spent two hours at the hospital waiting for them to dig it out of his shoulder and it doesn’t mean anything?”

“The doctor said the angle of the first shot, the one with the exit wound, indicated he was shot by someone taller than him.” Eretson looks levelly at her for a second and she waits for him to present his case again, linking the truth into a tangled web of a cage around her, but then he shrugs. “So it could have been anybody.”

Astrid snorts, too exhausted to stop herself, and Eretson relaxes ever so slightly, leaning forward in his chair to take his suit jacket off and pushing up his sleeves.

“I’ve spent the last twenty four hours sifting through every connection you have to this case,” he folds his hands on the desk and sighs. She doesn’t doubt it, from the circles under his eyes and the fact he’s only broken concentration to refill his coffee mug. “You’re halfway through your Masters in criminology at Berk University, I could use a second set of eyes.”

“I’m a suspect,” she says automatically, looking between the cuff on her wrist and the pile of papers on the desk that represent possibly the only way she could actually help Hiccup right now. “My top suspect, in fact, until last night,” he stands up and stretches his arms over his head, “coffee?”

“What changed? I’m still connected to the other three m—events.” She barely stops herself from calling it a murder, but the damage is done anyway, and it feels like Hiccup must have heard her from across town, giving him the closure he wanted with the heaviest consequences attached.

“Like you said, you’d be a pretty shit murderer if you stopped to save your victim’s life.” He picks up his coffee mug and hints at another almost smile, “plus, anyone who disembowels indiscriminately in alleyways wouldn’t stop to help someone as annoying as Jorgenson. Do you not drink coffee?”

“Yes, I mean, I do,” she nods, shocked but grateful, and on the way to the door he pauses, flicking a finger against the chain on her handcuffs. The cuff around the arm of the chair falls open, like it wasn’t ever fully clicked into place and her eyes widen. “You were testing me.”

“Cream or sugar?”

“If I’d done it, I would have tried to get away,” she takes the key that he hands her and unlocks the cuff on her wrist, rubbing the sore line from where she stretched against it in the hospital.

“Black then.” He leaves the office and she scoots her chair forward, starting her sort at the outside of his piles and working in.

The coffee is burned, but it’s enough to keep her awake as she updates herself on the parts of the
case she isn’t familiar with. There are witness accounts, most of them Grimborn enthusiasts from Hiccup’s doomed tour, drawing parallels that half make sense. There are notes on knives and how they cut and doodles of how victims were dragged to where they were found. There’s screenshots of the footage of her and Hiccup and a Google Maps estimate of how long it takes to walk between locations on various paths.

It’s the most complete file Astrid has ever encountered, the criminology story problem that doesn’t exist in which a case begs for a one variable solution.

“It’s a set up.” It’s seven thirty in the morning when she finally gets there, startled enough out of her study by the first few diligent officers settling at their desks to look up. “It’s too thorough.”

“Maybe I’m just good at my job, Miss Hofferson,” Eretson’s eyes don’t stray from his most recent print out, but the straight-faced tough-guy routine doesn’t work on her exhaustion frayed nerves.

“The witness accounts all agree, there’s not one Grimborn-ologist in here claiming a double event with a murder across the city or trying to call out a politician.”

“To be fair, one thought it was aliens,” he puts down what he’s reading.

“There’s always someone who says aliens,” she rolls her eyes, sliding that particular account towards him, “that was the body found behind the frozen yogurt shop. It probably has a rooftop refrigerator unit, the spaceship sound they claimed they heard could be someone walking on sheet metal.”

“Both you and Hiccup were there,” Eretson narrows his eyes and slowly slides a stack of papers towards her, “can you make any sense of this?”

It’s a sheet detailing health insurance payouts related to Snotlout’s benefits. Yearly physicals, the occasional mental health visit relating to occupational concerns, a couple of internal medicine visits pertaining to something gastro-intestinal. All in all typical, except for the prosthetics fittings.

Every visit is listed in chronological order and it appears that Eretson has some sort of provisional access to the system, because the patient in each line is only identified as ‘Male: 25’.

“Yeah,” she sets the stack down and waits for Eretson to reveal what he knows, Hiccup’s casual kindness to someone now fossilized in Berkian history on the front of her mind.

“I didn’t know I was risking a workplace sensitivity lecture every time I said Jorgenson didn’t have a leg to stand on,” Eretson jokes, still testing, still refusing to commit to anything in case he’s wrong and Astrid sees for a moment what she’s not allowed to see.

She sees that the well-documented case is still open and unsolved because Eretson refuses to ask for clarification, let alone help.

“It’s not him,” she sets the stack down, “it’s Hiccup. He has a prosthetic leg, he’s obviously on Snotlout’s insurance.”

“Do you know the second victim?” Eretson’s trust wavers briefly as he shoves a picture in front of Astrid. Dave, who Hiccup introduced her to when one murder seemed impossible, in an army uniform, younger and better groomed.

She’s said too much to Eretson already, but she’s also learned more than she ever trying to stay out of it, like that was ever possible.
“Hiccup introduced us once,” she makes her move, hoping it’s not a mistake, “he knew him from volunteering at Gobber’s shelter. At some point he gave Dave an old prosthetic that he wasn’t using.”

“He didn’t mention that.” He tucks the picture of Dave back into his folder, “neither did you when I interviewed you at the crime scene.”

“Well, it would have made him look pretty guilty.” She shrugs, “especially after he stumbled upon two bodies in a row with word of mouth as his only alibi.”

“It would have, wouldn’t it?” Eretson looks at the clock and rubs his red eyes before standing. “You’ve given me lots to think about. Can I give you a ride home?”

“Home?” She thinks of the stain on the pavement by the courtyard wall and shakes her head, “I can stay here and help more, at least until we hear back from the hospital.”

“Grisly will be in soon, I think it’s in the best interest of my job if he doesn’t know that I let my top suspect see the case file.” He looks sympathetic anyway, more human for the night spent together.

“Right,” she nods, “makes sense.”

“Probably best if we leave through the back,” he double checks the hallway before waving her forward and herding her a little too fast to a door that opens into an alley that makes her head spin. An alley that looks like tours with Hiccup and blood and old pictures that don’t capture how it feels to see someone splayed out and taken apart.

Eretson doesn’t say anything when she gets in the front seat of his unmarked car and her eyes burn with the morning sun even through the window. Hours of reading without blinking enough in a vain attempt at not seeing what’s etched on the inside of her eyelids left them dry and itchy, and they seem to dry out more as the car approaches her building.

Her building that’s felt more like a bivouac than a home, exposed and impermanent in blunt ways that she pushed back at out of habit more than decision.

When the car stops and she looks up at the sound-deadened window of Elizabeth Smith’s apartment, her hand freezes on the handle.

“Miss Hofferson?” Eretson is all manners again and it’s so normal that it throws everything into sharp relief.

Ten feet away, she saw Snotlout almost die the night before. She’s used to handcuffs and polite police voices and the wrong end of murder accusations and suddenly the level head she prides herself on feels like a lead helmet, holding her down and drowning her in this chaos. If she gets out of the car right now like everything is normal and walks up into her apartment like it’s home, it would be inhaling brackish ooze and accepting her fate.

“Can you drive me to Ruffnut’s?” She re-buckles her seatbelt and starts giving him directions before he can ask about her change of heart.

She hasn’t showed up at someone’s house without texting first since elementary school, but she doesn’t hesitate to knock, pivoting again on a fallback point. Ruffnut was the first person she called when all of this started and maybe if she’d listened then, things would be different now.

But she wouldn’t have gotten to know Hiccup, and she feels awful for thinking it so soon after hearing those echoed gunshots and seeing Snotlout under the streetlight.
“Astrid?” Ruffnut opens the door in her pajamas, frowning slightly, “did you text?”

“No,” her voice shakes, just barely, but it’s enough for her friend to notice, “Eretson just dropped me off—”

“Is he still here?” She asks, too interested, and Astrid scowls, shouldering past her into her place.

“Is Tuff here?”

“What’s wrong?” Ruff shuts the door and follows her as she knocks on Tuffnut’s bedroom door.

“I’m mad at you, I’m here to see Tuff.”

“You’re mad at me?”

“Yes,” Astrid smacks Tuffnut’s door a couple more times until she hears signs of life inside, “Snotlout is actually a pretty good guy, I think. Or close to it. And you couldn’t take a murder investigation seriously enough to keep you from hitting on Eretson in front of him, let alone a relationship.”

“Giving me whiplash,” Ruffnut is genuinely concerned as she leans on the wall, “are you ok? What’s going on?”

“I thought I heard Astrid’s distinctively brutal knock at my door,” Tuffnut opens the door and places his hands on her shoulders before inhaling deeply. “You look like shit, what happened?”

“You don’t know.” She sighs, the weight of telling the story almost as heavy as the idea of living in it. She gains a new appreciation for the fact that Hiccup tells Viggo Grimborn’s story nightly, because the last few weeks must have felt like penance for something he didn’t do. Something horrible he’s been tied to for no reason.

“I don’t know anything,” Tuffnut grabs her arm and steers her towards their couch before sitting next to her, “and Ruffnut knows even less.”

“Not true, I know I was hanging out with Hiccup yesterday and he got some call and freaked out mumbling something about the hospital, but I definitely didn’t grab his ass that hard so—”

“This is exactly what I’m talking about!” Astrid snaps, dry eyes suddenly wet as Tuffnut slings his arm over her shoulders.

“I was just kidding with him, Astrid, I know you like him, I wouldn’t—”

“You can’t take anything seriously, it’s all about how you can shock someone or—Snotlout was over at my place last night, I think he was worried I was scared or something,” her voice dips and she stares at her lap, “and I guess I should have been, because he got shot right outside.”

“Is he ok?” Ruffnut blanches and Astrid feels like she’s letting Hiccup down all over again when she shrugs.

“He wasn’t yesterday.”

Ruffnut starts texting, all traces of humor gone from her expression as Tuff gets the rest of the story, pausing Astrid at the crime scene to suggest that she take a shower. He listens through the bathroom doorway as she scrubs under her fingernails, trying to be as vague as possible about what happened with Eretson. Tuffnut would say things he shouldn’t, even if it does seem like Eretson is
coming around.

To what, she’s not sure, but she can’t think about that anymore today, not without news.

Astrid’s just changing into the band tee-shirt Tuffnut insisted she borrow, as she’d earned it by telling Ruffnut off, when Ruff bursts into the room, phone outstretched.

“It’s Hiccup.”

“Hello?” Astrid mouths ‘thanks’ as Ruffnut sits on her brother’s bed, curled up and holding her knees.

“Hi, Astrid,” Hiccup sounds impossibly more tired than she feels and it makes her chest ache, worried and off center. “How’s it going?”

“That depends,” she sits down next to Ruffnut, “how’s it going over there?”

“He’s out of surgery, in the ICU, we’re just waiting for him to wake up now.”

“That’s great,” she nods, accepting Ruffnut’s head leaning on her shoulder, too relieved to stay mad.

“I tried to call you but—”

“Yeah, I don’t have my phone.”

“I thought you might have said that, but um, last night was…kind of a blur,” he leaves room for a laugh that doesn’t come, “did Eretson take it?”

“No, nothing like that.” It’s a new euphemism for ‘legally, it’s not any worse,’ and she hates coming up with those. “I can come down there and wait with you.”

“They’re only letting one visitor in the room right now, but I’ll keep you posted.” He sighs, “you sound tired.”

“So do you.” That gets a breathy, exhausted laugh she feels in her chest and Hiccup says something about a doctor heading his way before hanging up. “He said he’d keep us in the loop.”

“He told me Snotlout hasn’t woken up yet.” Ruffnut is unusually somber and Astrid nods. “Was he—I mean, did I piss him off?”

“You pissed me off,” she sighs, “did you know he got suspended because he wouldn’t speak up as a witness and complicate the case?”

“That’s stupid,” Ruff wipes her face but her guilty expression doesn’t budge, “he should have just lied.”

“Yeah, but he didn’t.”

Astrid doesn’t expect to be able to sleep, but the long night catches up to her almost as soon as she hits the twins’ couch. She sleeps past hospital visiting hours but is glad to wake up to a text that Snotlout woke up alright and the doctors think that the next day they should be able to move him to a more private room. She gets the feeling Hiccup isn’t going home, but doesn’t know what to say about it, especially from someone else’s phone. After all their dates but one became public domain on account of murder, it seems unnecessarily rude for this urge to comfort him to be between anyone but them.
So when he calls Ruffnut again the next morning, almost sheepishly asking if someone could bring him a phone charger and a toothbrush, Astrid gets a ride from Tuffnut. There’s a strange blast of déjà vu entering the hospital without handcuffs and seeing Hiccup in a corner chair in the waiting room, pale but livelier than he was sitting next to her and shaking two nights ago.

“Hey,” he stands up and the extra little hop on his right leg makes her think back to Eretson’s office and all the things she can’t say right now. “I walked down so that you wouldn’t have to sign in. Thanks, Sharon!” He waves at a nurse behind a nearby station and points with his shoulder down the hallway.

“Is she taking a shift?” The nurse raises a maternal eyebrow and Hiccup shakes his head.

“Just bringing me supplies, I told you I’m here for the long haul.”

“I don’t think he’d mind a break from you!” Nurse Sharon teases and Hiccup waves her off.

“How’s he doing?” Astrid asks, reaching for Hiccup’s hand and tugging lightly so that he’ll look at her.

He’s exhausted, face waxy and jawline dusted with more stubble than she’s seen him with. It makes him look younger instead of older, like he’s dealing with too much to remember to shave. His eyes are determined though, even if his expression is cautious, taut with hope he doesn’t want to have.

“He’s awake,” he shrugs, squeezing her fingers and pausing outside a door, “the stitches are holding, and his vitals look good. Mostly the doctors are worried about mental changes, since his heart stopped in the ambulance and he’d lost a lot of blood so they don’t know how long his brain went without oxygen. Memory loss or personality change or…”

“Hey,” she tilts his chin up with the toothbrush in the hand not holding his, “let’s just go in, ok?”

“Sure,” he nods, self-convincing, before opening the door.

Snotlout is propped halfway seated in the hospital bed, tubes from his arms connected to a beeping machine at his side. She remembers being twenty in her uncle’s hospital room, watching similar machines stop beeping, but when she glances back at Snotlout, the comparison is shattered. His shoulders are bandaged, and his face is bleary, but he’s flipping her off with a disconcertingly gloating grin.

“Hey Astrid, Pats are winning.”

Personality change seems an unlikely symptom.

“Put your arm down,” Hiccup snaps, rushing to Snotlout’s bedside and ignoring when the middle finger is turned on him, “someone just tried to shoot it off.”

“It’s not football season,” Astrid tries not to feel awkward about how comfortable it feels to sit on the small couch next to the bed and look up at the TV. The relief is like a drug, an internal release as strong as whatever’s obviously dripping into Snotlout’s arm through one of those tubes. “Is this a rerun? You’re watching a rerun football game, really?”

“My boys are bringing it home, again,” he laughs then glares at Hiccup, “stop reading the papers, the doctors read the papers.”

“This says your cholesterol is up from your last check up, I’m going to ask a nurse about it.”
“Dude, I just got shot.”

“With a butter bullet?” Hiccup snorts, shaking his head and hanging the chart reluctantly back on the foot of Snotlout’s bed.

“No, with an actual bullet from a fucking gun, so could you please sit down next to your hot girlfriend and shut up for a second?” He winks at Astrid with both eyes as he compliments her and she remembers the reason for her visit.

“I brought the charger,” she takes it out of her pocket, but Hiccup isn’t paying attention as he’s staring Snotlout down with his best stern nurse impression.

“The doctors said mental changes could be anger issues—”

“Fuck off.”

“I don’t think he’s having any issue being angry,” she tries to joke, but it falls flat with Hiccup’s falling expression.

“Or memory loss, and you don’t remember who shot you.”

“Yeah, I was pretty busy being shot, I didn’t have a chance to introduce myself.” Snotlout’s heart monitor beeps slightly faster and Hiccup panics, rushing over to pet his head.

“You have to keep your blood pressure down—”

“Hiccup,” Astrid stands up and grabs his shoulder, attempting to pull him back towards the couch with her, but he shrugs her off.

“The stitches in your artery aren’t healed and it could burst—”

“Well it’ll burst all over your face because you won’t get out of mine!” He snaps, and the door cracks open enough for a nurse to peek her head in.

“Everything ok?”

“I don’t know, Hiccup, is everything ok?” Snotlout looks pointedly at the couch. Or he tries to and his bleary eyes drift sideways towards the floor.

“We’re fine,” Hiccup sits down, hands folded neatly on his lap, and Astrid sits next to him with a nod.

“Let me know if you need anything,” the nurse gives Hiccup a warning look as she shuts the door and Astrid lets her hand rest on his knee to keep him from jumping back up the second she’s gone.

“Just remember, the blood pressure,” Hiccup mumbles and Snotlout rolls his eyes.

“I know, which is why I’m relaxing,” he points at the TV, “by watching the Pats win, like they always do.”

“It sounds more like you’re gloating to me,” Astrid snorts and Hiccup relaxes in a disjointed, uneven way, like clothes falling halfway off a hanger.

“Maybe I can relax a tiny bit about the personality change.”

Snotlout’s hand curls into a triumphant fist on his lap when a play he had to be expecting goes right
and Astrid shakes her head, relaxing back into the couch and dragging Hiccup with her. He’s more than stiff, he’s pulled taut, like invisible wires are attached to every point of him and yanking.

“Have you left since you got here?” She recognizes his jacket from the other night and maybe the shirt underneath it.

“Nah,” he shrugs with none of his usual bounce and Astrid wants to cut the cables holding him so rigid.

“Or slept?”

“Sleep?” He snorts, “who needs sleep?” There’s a frantic tinge to the edge of his smile, but it feels like the first time he’s actually looked at her today when he drops the joke, “just kidding, I got a couple of hours this morning when they moved him to the room with the couch. How about you?”

“More than that,” she shrugs, “not lots. Ruff’s couch isn’t the best.”

“Ruff’s couch?” He turns his shoulders to look at her more fully.

“I haven’t been back to my place either,” she shrugs, and even saying it sounds wrong. It’s Elizabeth Smith’s place and it has been for a hundred years.

“Astrid,” Snotlout says her name like he’s about to ask for too much and she narrows her eyes.

“Yeah?”

“Can you scratch my feet?”

“I’ve got it,” Hiccup jumps up, hopping again on his right foot and stumbling to the foot of the bed.

“No,” Snotlout shakes his head, “I want Astrid to do it.”

“Which foot itches?”

“It’s weird if you do it, dude,” Snotlout squirms, “it’s kind of a sex thing.”

“Then I’m definitely not doing it,” Astrid opens her mouth to add something addressing the fact that she didn’t try and save his life just so that he could be disgusting about it, but Hiccup speaks up first.

“I would say that I’ll call my mom right now, except you know you’re not supposed to raise your blood pressure!”

“Dude,” Snotlout adjusts his seat, eyes clearer than they have been since Astrid arrived, the shock of what Hiccup just said blazing through the painkillers in his system, “I was just teasing Astrid because it’s funny when she gets all red and huffy. You’ve got to calm down.”

“I’m calm,” Hiccup examines his shaking hands and laughs, “ok, maybe I’m not, but—”

“Come here,” Astrid doesn’t mean it like an order, but Hiccup takes it like one, deflating exhausted with the weight of momentary decision off his shoulders. When he sits down next to her, she tries to rub the back of his neck, but it’s so tense she makes about as much headway as she would on the wooden arm of the couch.

“Don’t do that,” he groans, head in his hands, elbows on his knees. “That feels too good, it’ll put me to sleep.”
“Maybe you should sleep,” she rubs a circle into his shoulder with her thumb and ignores the selfish, gratified twist in her stomach when he groans again. She’s felt helpless since the other day in Eretson’s office when the truth twisted circumstance and shoved her in the middle, but this is something she can fix. She can get Hiccup to sleep, she can take some of the stress literally off of his shoulders.

“What if the doctors—”

“I’ll talk to the doctors,” she insists, pushing on his far shoulder and guiding his head into her lap when his resistance runs out. It takes him a minute to accept the position and curl his legs up on the couch, shifting to get comfortable. She brushes his hair off of his forehead and he sighs, resting his hand on her knee and stroking Tuffnut’s borrowed jeans with a slow thumb. “Go to sleep.”

His head feels heavier as he drifts off, mumbling some kind of approval when she starts combing her fingers through his hair. It’s soft and a little overgrown, edges curling slightly above the collar of the jacket she should have suggested he take off before laying down. Boyish where his stubble is, the contrast even more striking on his slack sleeping face.

“You’re like the Hiccup whisperer,” Snotlout says after a few minutes of silence, shifting in bed and wincing more than she’s seen.

“Are you ok?”

“No, I just got fucking shot,” he snorts, “it hurts even through the fun stuff they gave me, but if I so much as flinch, Hiccup has a fit about it.”

“He’s worried about you,” she traces the dark line of his eyebrow and it relaxes at the touch. Snotlout is watching his face, some drug-addled version of fond, and as irritating as the concept of the friend-group was the other night, she feels it now. “I was pretty worried about you too.”

It says something about her tenacity that it took this much for her to stop seeing being alone as a victory, but everyone has their limit.

“His mom’s really hot,” Snotlout sighs, relaxing back into his pillows.

“Huh?”

“Hiccup’s mom? Milf. It pisses him off when I point it out, kind of an inside joke.” He looks back at Hiccup, frowning like he just said something normal for this situation. “When I was moving in, she was trying to convince Hiccup to move back with her. It was like right after his dad died and the room I was moving into was this sad shrine he wouldn’t touch.”

“Oh, that’s…I’m sorry.”

“Our dads hated each other,” his eyes flick bitterly at the door, “which, considering who’s here right now and who’s not, I think we know who is actually a piece of shit. I was just trying to get out of the town I grew up in, because I knew I wanted to be a cop and if I did it there, I’d just be working for my dad and at my uncle’s funeral someone was asking Hiccup about getting a roommate.”

“You guys are so close, I assumed you had to have grown up together.”

“Like I saw him at Christmas and stuff, sometimes, he’s like my second cousin once across or some shit, but he was always doing something nerdy so we didn’t really talk.” He looks at her like he’s asking her to swear on something vital to him and she looks back at Hiccup’s head in her lap,
his long eyelashes twitching in his sleep. “I just moved in because I needed a place I could afford, but I couldn’t take all his moping. He used to stare at the front door like he was waiting for his dad to come through it or something, depressing shit. If I didn’t do something, I was going to lose my mind.”

“So you made friends.”

“I tried, I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but he’s a weirdo.” He smiles affectionately, “I tried taking him to clubs, but he doesn’t even have one left foot, so dancing is a lost cause, just a warning. I made him a tinder account and got him a date with some girl who wanted to go on a geeky historical tour and you know how that ended up.”

“He started doing Grimborn tours.” As complicated as this whole mess is, she still can’t make herself regret it.

“And he started going to class again and generally acting human. Well, his weirdo version of human anyway.” Snotlout sighs, “I’m really glad I didn’t bang his mom, then this really would have been like his dad getting shot all over again.”

“I don’t think you saved him any grief, Snot.”

“Maybe I’ve still got a shot then,” he grins, raising an eyebrow, and Astrid sighs.

“You know when you love someone, and they do or say something so incomprehensibly stupid that you judge yourself for a second? Like there’s that second you think to yourself: ‘I had to choose that one’?”

“I live in that feeling.” Snotlout shakes his head at Hiccup. “Why?”

“Me too,” she looks at Snotlout and admits defeat, “but I think it’s about to get a lot worse with the whole friend-group to consider.”
“I just don’t understand how you aren’t bored.” The first thing Hiccup hears is Astrid’s voice, on edge and at ease all at once, close enough to surround him entirely. When Astrid’s fingers drag softly through his hair, he doesn’t care about the hazy confusion of waking up somewhere other than his bed. He knows exactly where he is. “There are obvious problems in the league—“

“Problems like the Patriots being the greatest and Tom Brady reinventing the game every year he postpones retirement?” Snotlout snorts, slurring the edges of his words slightly. Drunk maybe, but Hiccup doesn’t care because of Astrid’s touch lingering under his ear. “Those aren’t problems from my side.”

“Ok, but you have to acknowledge that in a league of thirty-two teams, the fact that the competition is between one team and everyone else means that there’s something wrong.” She’s emphatic but quiet, one step below a whispered yell, and she twirls a lock of hair at the nape of his neck around her finger, her nail barely dragging across his scalp. He wishes he could fall back asleep before Snotlout’s reply, but he’s not fast enough.

“Or that the one team is just that fucking awesome.”

“That’s literally impossible.” Astrid’s hand grazes along the back of his neck and pauses to rub at the least pressing knot of muscle in his back. “The entire point of the draft and the salary cap is to keep the league competitive.”

“But that doesn’t apply, because Brady plays for less because he loves the game.”

“Is that another way to say that he married someone richer than he is and he’s a little bitch who cries when he loses?” Her fingers brush across Hiccup’s forehead before she drags fingernails through his hair again, absent-minded and sweeter for how habitual the motion is. His hip and lower back feel like he’s been sleeping for hours without moving and he gets the feeling that she’s been touching him this whole time.

His arm is asleep and his eyes feel sandy and dry, but he can’t remember the last time he was this comfortable.

“You think men can’t be emotional? That’s pretty sexist of you.”

There it is, time to wake up.

He yawns, stretching slowly with a wince and lifting his head off of Astrid’s lap, elbow on the couch cushion to hold him half upright. It takes a couple blinks to detangle his eyelashes and when he does, Snotlout is staring at him, pale but distinctly smug in the way he only gets when he’s winning arguments about sports.

And he’s in a hospital bed instead of on Hiccup’s dad’s chair at the apartment. His shoulder is wrapped in gauze and his eyes are morphine bleary instead of happy Saturday night drunk.

Right, the hospital.

“Morning sleeping beauty, are you done being a spaz?”

“I’m still breathing, aren’t I?” Hiccup looks at the window, trying to judge the time. It’s too bright to be morning, the sun peeking through dispersing clouds. Early afternoon, he’d guess, given he
feels at least partially back on schedule.

“You were snoring,” Snotlout tells him, forever helpful, “and sleep-talking.”

“Oh,” he sits up, looking sheepishly over at Astrid, “what did I say?”

“Nothing coherent,” she shrugs, rolling her shoulders and folding one leg underneath her, probably stiff from being his pillow for however long he slept. Her blue eyes are bright, teasing above the worry, and the corner of her mouth twitches. “Emphatic though. You really meant whatever you were mumbling about.”

She’s too pretty to be here, smiling quietly at him and cocking her head while he sits up the rest of the way and rubs his face. His greasy, stubbly face with gritty tear streaks from crying. Apparently he got enough rest to be embarrassed that this is the condition of the head he rested on Astrid’s lap for hours, so that’s something.

He preferred being half-asleep, her hands in his hair while she and Snotlout argued in useless circles, like this was just a usual night in a world he wishes he lived in.

“How long was I out?” He stands up and twists slowly side to side, willing the deep stiffness in his lower back to fade and losing the argument.

“Long enough to watch the same football game one and a half times,” she glares at Snotlout, standing to take a sip of water from a second glass that appeared on the bedside table while Hiccup was sleeping.

“Hiccup, you should probably get this sore loser out of here before she starts being sexist again.” Snotlout rolls his eyes, hunkering down further in his pillows and Hiccup recognizes the painkiller grogginess in his face.

That’s how Hiccup must have looked in the hospital a decade ago, down a foot and wishing his dad would leave and let him sleep off the dizzy fog in his head, while his dad insisted on staying, gray-faced and worried.

There’s a short list of days in Hiccup’s life that transected reality and made it impossible for him to go back to living how he did before them. His leg. His parents divorce. His dad dying.

Meeting Astrid makes the list, and the anxious twist at the thought of trying to explain the gravity of that to her builds on the depth of the line being drawn right now. On the precipice of a relationship he’s never thought he’d be able to manage after what happened with his parents, he’s here hovering over someone recovering from a gunshot wound, too involved to let them sleep. Like everyone with a complicated relationship with their parents, Hiccup has of course feared becoming his dad. He always thought it would have something to do with gaining an unfortunate appreciation for bagpipes or the law, and more than that, he always thought it was impossible as long as he kept generally failing. If he didn’t try, he couldn’t come up short.

But even five years of tax dodging unemployment couldn’t save him from becoming himself. Accidentally like his dad enough for it to hurt, but entirely lacking the easy to avoid roadmap of his father’s footsteps.

“You ok?” Astrid asks, hand twining more easily than he deserves with his.

“Yeah,” he lies, “I could use some fresh air, maybe—”
“Like that’s possible until you shower,” Snotlout rolls his eyes, “it smells like the locker room in here, and it’s not Mr. Sponge-bath’s fault.” He points at himself with his good arm and Hiccup takes a self-conscious step away from Astrid.

“Ok, then some not-hospital filtered air. Will you be—I mean, if I go home for a while—”

“If you don’t, I will call Sharon to kick you out.” Snotlout’s hand hovers over the nurse call button, “don’t test me, Haddock.”

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It’s bright enough outside that he checks the time, squinting at his phone screen in the sudden sunlight appearing from behind a cloud. A little past two, but that seems irrelevant, considering he’s not quite sure of the day.

“So, shower?” Astrid asks too brightly, her voice snapping him out of his head for the third time in the last hour.

“Huh?” He blinks at her, sure he must have heard wrong. “If my head was so greasy that you feel like you need a shower now, I apologize. Sincerely.”

“Not at all,” she wrinkles her nose, half-teasing and half looking at him like he’s crazy and he scratches the back of his neck.

“Right, and now that I drew your attention to all this,” he waves his hand in front of his face, “I’m assuming you’re not offering to join me.”

“Hiccup!” She smacks his arm, hard but not as hard as he knows she’s capable of, and he doesn’t know how he feels about the fact that she’s laughing. A real laugh, a relieved laugh. At him, absolutely, but not unkind.

“Wait, are you?”

“The concept of a shower was the only thing to get you out of that room in three days, so I reminded you,” she blushes even though her reasoning is sound, maybe because it’s embarrassing to be essentially propositioned by someone who probably looks like they’ve written off soap as a concept. “You seem a little out of it.”

“Oh, absolutely.”

“Do you need to go back in there and get yourself checked out? Maybe you concussed yourself sleeping on that shitty couch?” The worried lines between her eyebrows make him want to smooth them out, to assure her the way she did him when nothing but the difficult truth could.

“No, I guess it’s just that nearly losing Snotlout is somehow summing up every trauma I’ve spent the last decade avoiding.”

Great, that’ll ease her mind.

“Every trauma?” She smacks his arm again, sort of gentler, “you’ve been holding out on me, I thought I got your whole traumatic past on our midnight tour.”

“I know we said that wasn’t a date, but I was still following the first date rule of baggage dumping.” He snorts, “you know, get the dead dad thing out of the way so you subliminally didn’t worry about impressing a future father-in-law, but the missing leg would have been a lot. I wasn’t
looking for pity.” He can say it because he knows Astrid would never give that to him.

He fell on her when he was at his lowest, most terrified point, and she was nothing but honest and solid, and that’s more comforting than he would have ever expected.

“Well, I would have had more warning when we found your old leg attached to a murder victim,” she nudges his elbow and starts walking, freeing his feet from the pavement they felt glued to. He thinks if she weren’t here, he’d walk right back to Snotlout’s room, compelled but entirely unable to help.

“Second out of three,” he sighs, back internally creaking like a cartoon door when he forces his gait even, “and there was the foot? With the Ryker letter approximation?”

“I haven’t thought about the note in forever;” she shakes her head, pausing to tap too many times at a crosswalk button, “not that I forgot it, I definitely didn’t forget it.” The light changes color and she starts walking again, pulling him away from the hospital in the only way he’d be grateful for. “But no, we’re talking about your trauma, not Grimborn.”

“The letter attached to the foot sent to my apartment isn’t exactly Grimborn, is it?” He understands the blurring line attached but tugs at it anyway, seeing where in the web of Astrid’s ever-fascinating mind it’s connected.

She sighs, shoving her hands deep in her pockets like having pockets is a novelty. Then she looks up at him, biting her lip and refusing to wince at what she’s about to say, facing the truth again like he trusted her to do when it mattered most.

“Snotlout’s really high.”

“That’d be the morphine for his gunshot wounds, plural, what did he say?”

There was a time where Hiccup would have been mortified to leave Snotlout alone with anyone he was interested in, in any capacity. Let alone Astrid, or someone he felt this way about. Except no, he’s never felt like this about anyone, and her Snotlout tolerance is only part of it.

A part that lets her fit into a life he wants but doesn’t understand how to have yet, sure, but only part of the reason he likes her so much.

“He told me about your dad,” she shrugs, sheepish, and he wants to tilt her chin up to meet his eyes. A sexy chin grab, she called it, mortified and adorable but he shuts that thought off before he can follow it to blood and police and complication.

“I already told you about my dad though,” he laughs, “back when you thought you’d get murdered on a tour with me, which, I guess geographically, we were both close—”

“This, he told me about this.” She stops and faces him, looking so much like she wants to shove him that he looks away, trying to be distracted. The Ripped Tavern is right there, drawing him in like a perpendicular source of gravity, but he can’t focus on it with Astrid staring twin blue lightning bolts into his face.

“My tendency to change the subject?”

“He told me about how it was when he moved in.” Her voice is as gentle as the grip on his arms isn’t. The grip tethering him rudely to present day Berk, the land of trauma wards and messes he has to figure out. The land tethered to Grimborn through mystery, one important and one ephemeral and endless, a mystery resort for fascination without commitment.
As much as people want to live on vacation, when life’s consequences follow, it gets less fun.

“He told me how you found Grimborn-ology.” Her hand slides up to his shoulder, bracing, a little uncomfortable, and worse because he knows how much he trusts her. How right she always is. “And how before, you hadn’t been leaving the house or…”

“I’d just moved here, ok?” He starts walking because he doesn’t know how to talk while standing still. Because the Ripped Tavern is an eighteen-fifties pub that makes him feel grounded and he wants to be closer to it when he says too much and untethers himself again. “When everything happened with my dad, I’d just moved here to this city that he gave his life trying to protect. It felt hostile, but going back to live with my mom would be letting the thing he died for go. And…Viggo Grimborn was the only thing that made it feel like anyone had lived in this city before my dad died in it.”

The words shed more weight from his shoulders than he thinks they will, but for once, feeling lighter is worse. Dizzy, even.

“And now someone obsessed with Viggo Grimborn keeps killing people.” Astrid makes the leap he’s glad not to be bold enough to and he sighs, resting his head on the wall of the tavern. It’s old brick, sturdy brick, the kind of brick that weathers things it shouldn’t have to. “Centered around you.”

The bass inside kicks up a notch and the ‘Happy Hour, 3-6’ sign to Hiccup’s left catches his eye when the wall vibrates like it shouldn’t.

“Did…did Heather renovate?”

“What?”

“These walls should be solid,” he grabs Astrid’s hand and presses it against the brick, “they shouldn’t move with bass like this unless someone drilled speakers into the walls. Hundred and fifty-year-old stone walls with some cheap Amazon speaker system crumbling the mortar…” He exhales, voice heavy and tired, “there was no building code, just organized chaos relying on intuition, and when you drill into that…”

“Do you trust me?” She asks, chin set stubbornly forward like no isn’t an answer, and it hurts that she doesn’t automatically know that.

“A frankly alarming amount.” His fingers curl around hers against the wall and she nods.

“Good, come on,” she grabs his wrist and drags him after her, explaining over her shoulder as she yanks him around the corner and through the pub’s front door, “we never finished our private tour.”

He freezes just inside, bending his knees to keep her from pulling him over. It works, barely, and she turns around, head cocking under a row of tee-shirts that say ‘Grimborn 1883-?’ in drippy, red lettering, hanging on a newly installed rack on a freshly whitewashed wall. “What’s wrong?”

“Look around,” he gestures with his free hand, “she painted—is that an Alexa? I was joking about the Amazon speakers—“

Astrid cuts him off with a palm pressed a little less than gently over his mouth and chin and she’s too close for him to be this desperate and floating. He bites his lip to keep from kissing her hand like an idiot or licking it so that she jerks back and he can complain about HGTV and how it’s destroying the city’s landmarks.
“You said you trusted me.” She doesn’t let go so he nods, “then let’s finish the tour.”

“Some of the rafters in here are probably American Chestnut, and they’re coated in enough latex paint to look like shiplap,” he says as soon as she takes her hand away, “it’s—“

“You said it was my tour,” she cuts him off, pointing at the side door, her hair bouncing on her shoulder with the motion, “I want to finish it.”

“You said if you knew it was your tour, you would have specified for me to wear the hat.”

“As much as I like the hat, you don’t need it.” She pulls him towards the side door again and he looks at the old wooden booths, buffed smooth and half re-finished. “Hiccup—“

“Just a second, ok?” He impulsively kisses her too casually on the forehead, stubble scraping over her temple, and stumbles with a right-footed hop up to the bar. He raps his knuckles on the newly smooth wood counter and the busboy looks up, startled that someone is interrupting him cleaning a tap, like that’s not an insult to the impoverished people who once depended on beer drippings for calories. “Do you have a pen? And a napkin?”

The busboy stutters something to the affirmative and hands Hiccup a napkin and a branded pen that he chews on for a second to think of his message before scrawling ‘Drilling through hundred fifty year old mortar to install smart speakers, very Orwellian of you’ and sliding the napkin back across the bar.

“Give this to Heather for me when she comes in, alright?”

“Who do I say it’s from?” The busboy frowns but tucks it into his apron anyway.

“Oh, she’ll know.” He pats the counter and turns around, walking with the only immediate purpose he has left to the side door of the bar where Astrid is waiting, thumbs tucked in her pockets, “so, finishing the tour?”

“Or starting a new one, either way,” she opens the door that he’s never opened in the daytime and a direct beam of sunshine streams through, cutting paint fumes the way it never could the tavern’s usual dust.

Hiccup steps outside and half-wonders where he is, because he’s definitely not standing in the creepy, ancient alley he’s started three tours a day in for the better part of five years.

The alley is idyllic in the early spring afternoon, cobblestones clean from what could be rain if he didn’t know about the crime scene cleanup. The usually weatherized lamp post is glimmering and the crowd of people gathering between quaint, ancient brick walls could be from a picture of the outskirts of a small European city just now being recognized by tourists.

Hiccup blinks twice, his eyes measuring automatic distances from the wall to the storm drain, facts about Mary Johnson flitting through his head.

He remembers the first time he saw this alley, at the end of his first Grimborn tour when he was lucky enough to be standing at the exact spot Mary Johnson was found, just how Astrid did on the tour she attempted when she was deciding whether to have him arrested or not. Both times, it was cold and damp and the alley had a foreboding cloud hovering above the ground Hiccup still sees blood when he looks at, and he struggles to put the two images together in his head.

This alley looks like it goes with the Ripped Tavern as it was, before Grimborn-ology got a hold of it. A place where people live, a street that gets them places.
“So, fourth site,” Astrid elbows a guy out of the way of the storm drain and stands on just the right spot, “what do you have to say about it?”

“Oh,” Hiccup rubs his hands together, trying to find his rhythm with the small but irritated group of people filtering past them and trying to stand on the drain with Astrid. Oh, not people, Grimborn tourists, a phrase which makes his stomach churn like he never thought possible. One jostles her and she glares, looking back at Hiccup to hurry up. “Right. Mary Johnson, the fourth site. She was a prostitute looking for—”

“I know that,” she cuts him off, “I know all about the investigation and her last bar tab and how her murder is what got Ryker off of the suspect list for good. I’m asking why you care about it.”

He snorts, “it was always quiet. Lonely almost, except not lonely, because under that light,” he points up at the incandescent bulb that so accurately mimics the gaslights of a hundred years ago in the dark and sees a slightly cheesy-looking, oversized eyesore, “it was like stepping into a bubble where everything was the same as it was when—”

“Are you doing a tour?” A woman in a sparkly new Ripped Tavern shirt interrupts him, jostling between him and Astrid. “I thought all the tours were at night, I wanted to do one, but with the murderer still on the loose…”

“It’s a private tour, actually,” Astrid turns to stand beside him.

“He’s doing a tour!” She calls out anyway and a plump older man with a well-loved copy of that idiotic Krogan book under his arm steps up beside her. “I told you I’d find a daytime tour.”

“Do you also do a nighttime tour?” The man asks, “I think I’d prefer it with the ambiance, but my wife is scared.”

“Usually, I do, but…” But Snotlout. But the murders. But the fact that somehow in the last few months, giving tours has turned from getting to talk about his favorite thing to deflecting insensitive people away from questions that make him check corners twice before turning around them.

“See? It’s not safe to be out at night,” the woman giggles, grabbing her probable husband’s arm and tilting the book under it to better show its cover.

There’s a silhouette of a man in a top hat, brandishing a long, wicked knife and sneaking up behind a buxom silhouette of a historically inaccurate prostitute at the end of a dark alley. Hiccup bets the dog-eared pages along the bulk of it, spaced into four conspicuous chunks, are about bodies he doesn’t ever want to describe again.

“The Krogan book,” Hiccup flicks the cover with one hand and grabs Astrid’s hand with the other, “not quality research, half the dates are wrong, and he doesn’t know the difference between a ritualistic Jewish slaughterhouse blade and a steak knife at the Outback steakhouse they tore down the old kosher slaughterhouse to build.”

“Well, I’m not paying to be insulted,” the man huffs, tapping on his book and opening his mouth to make a point Hiccup can’t bring himself to listen to.

“You’re not paying at all, because I’m not giving tours,” he clears his throat like he’s doing exactly that, getting most of the attention in the alley before continuing, “you know, the great miracle of the Viggo Grimborn case is that by documenting a volatile period a little better than normal—”

“Deputy Ryker’s documentation is shit,” someone else in the crowd tries to start another argument
that Hiccup doesn’t care about.

“Just a second, I’m leaving, I just want to throw something out there for you all to think about.” He pauses and Astrid squeezes his hand, encouraging even though he doesn’t need it right now, “Maybe, if you all thought about Viggo Grimborn as a fascinating window to what life used to be like, instead of fixating on who died here and how disgusting it was, maybe, just maybe, someone wouldn’t be copying it now.”

“Let’s go,” Astrid tugs his arm, half jogging past the crowd of stupid book wavers and laughing when he stumbles after her. A couple people try and follow, yelling something about the tour leaving, and he pulls her sideways into the narrow alley he hasn’t used since the night he found Jennifer’s body by the storm drain.

Two turns to the right down familiar passageways that welcome them with a faint echo of footsteps and the cool relief of damp air and he feels like he can breathe again, maybe for the first time in weeks. Maybe longer.

He’d like to think that the tall brick walls were thanking him for defending their architectural honor, separate from blood. Really, it’s him thanking them for the quiet as he pauses at the next turn, pressing his hand to the solid, cool stone.

“I doubt that counts as the rest of a tour,” he lowers his voice when the first word echoes and Astrid shrugs, a tentative, almost smug smile pulling at the corner of her lips.

“It did what I wanted it to.”

“Which was?” He steps closer, just barely, cocking his head and pressing against the ghost of a boundary when his eyes dart to her lips.

“I have dealt with so many Grimborn-ologists in the last few months,” she pokes the center of his chest and looks so defiantly at him that he can’t help but lean in, “you’re not one.”

He stops short and frowns, “what?”

“You aren’t well-adjusted—”

“We’re doing this now, ok, odd choice, I thought you were trying to cheer me up—”

“I’m not,” she smiles, pressing her hand flat against his chest, “I’m trying to tell you the truth, which is that you aren’t one of those weirdos obsessed with Grimborn.”

“I’m confused as to how you came to that conclusion,” he shrugs, gesturing at the alleys around them, “considering how we met and half of what we talk about and where we are.”

“I deal with people trying to steal Grimborn artifacts from the archives every week, at least, more often lately. A Grimborn themed bar just painted over a hundred and seventy-year-old building, to make it more comfortable for tourists to take a watered down walk past places where people died horrible deaths. Someone so obsessed with Grimborn’s methods that they had to replicate them has been terrorizing the city for weeks and murder tourism has only gone up.”

“I don’t see what that has to do with me,” Hiccup chews his lip and she sighs, shoving him gently away and crossing her arms.

“Exactly.” She shakes her head, “you have an interest, sure, but it’s like you just said, you’re interested in how people lived, not how they died. And learning that you got into Grimborn
because of how much your dad loved this city…”

“So, I spend five years giving tours and you’re saying I’m a fake Grimborn geek boy?” He wants to be irritated just as much as he wants to laugh, but the result of the combination is too flat to echo even in the narrow alley. "At least my hat is an actual antique—"

“I’m saying there’s nothing cruel or destructive about the way that you learn things.” She says it like a compliment, tucking her hair behind her ear and looking importantly at him, like she can beam the meaning into his brain if she stares hard enough.

He doesn’t know how much gets through, but the fact that she means it this much makes his chest ache.

“We finished your tour, what now?” It’s either the exact wrong question or the right one because her expression softens to something like worry and she shrugs.

“I’m thinking I should probably go get my phone so that I can ask Fish if his spare room is still available,” she looks around, trying to see daylight at the mouth of one of the alleys, “how do we get out of here?”

“Here,” he gestures for her to follow him around the next corner, “why do you need Fishlegs’s spare room?”

“Because the twins couch is getting old really quick.” she squints as the sun pours into the mouth of the alley, pausing just before she trips on the low gate at the end.

“What’s wrong with your place? I thought you were pretty determined to fight off the serial killer onslaught with the home team advantage.” He stumbles slightly over the gate and catches himself on her shoulder, not that she seems to notice.

“I still haven’t been back after what happened to Snotlout,” she crosses her arms again but it’s more like she’s hugging herself than keeping him out. “I know I should feel better now that he’s obviously going to be ok, but—”

“He was sh—hurt at your place?” Hiccup feels himself go pale and Astrid’s eyebrows furrow, concerned and determined.

“No one told you.”

“I guess location wasn’t important when they didn’t know if he’d make it.”

“Hey,” she rubs his arm through his jacket, “he’s going to be fine though.”

“He was almost the fourth victim, wasn’t he?” Astrid was right about Grimborn being destructive.

“But he wasn’t,” she assures him, “and now it’s over, the copycat has four murders under his belt—”

“But Snotlout isn’t dead—”

“How would they know that?” She trusts him to keep up with her logic and he doesn’t want to let her down, so he nods for her to continue. “The last thing they saw looked pretty dismal for him and the news hasn’t said anything about it.”
“It’s a break from method, it’s—all those other slum murders in eighteen-eighty-three that people try to put the Grimborn name on to make it a more gruesome story, we know it doesn’t fit because the injury profile was different—”

She kisses him to shut him up, hands on both of his cheeks when she pulls back, “the other sites are in alleys, even today. The first is in an inhabited apartment building that’s not in an awful part of town anymore, a drive-by was probably the most Grimborn thing they could pull off.”

“I don’t want you to stay with Fishlegs,” he tugs her hands away from his face and squeezes them in his. “He doesn’t like me, remember?”

“I don’t care, because I like you, and you have enough going on with Snotlout, you don’t need me in your hair.”

“You like me now, sure, but after a couple weeks with that moustache?” His lame teasing gets a barely there twitch of a smile before she nods to herself.

“I should still get my phone.”

He could let her go alone, he knows that, it’s the middle of the afternoon and there’s nothing dangerous about it. Especially because it’s Astrid, so she’s right, the murders are over. She’s been good enough to tell him the hard truths though, and she deserves the same.

“I know I’m the one who’s supposed to be giving you a tour right now, but I think if you stopped telling me what to do, I’d be back at the hospital annoying Snotlout and feeling even more helpless than I do now.”

“Come with me,” she suggests but something about his expression stops her, “if I don’t want to see it, you probably really don’t.”

“I just had the Ripped back alley spoiled for me by sociopathic murder tourists, let me enjoy the ‘All Safe’ wall another day.”

“The ‘Al, I. Safe’ wall,” she corrects and he chooses to cement the image of her courtyard wall behind her, stealing his hat and correcting his tour because she couldn’t stand him thinking he was right when she thought he wasn’t, into his head. He doesn’t think it’ll do much against another pressure-washed, professionally, historically scrubbed patch of the ground, but it’s nice for now.

“Maybe you’re the Grimborn-ologist,” he teases, taking her hand and attempting a step towards his apartment, but she refuses to move her feet, one eyebrow raised. “I’m just saying, you’re awfully smug about a post-murder message.”

“A murder that I don’t even think was connected, by the way,” she insists as she starts walking beside him. The alleys aren’t much quicker than the main roads from here, and they’re close to Gruff’s anyway, so he stays on the main road, crossing the street one intersection early to avoid the alcove that Astrid doesn’t mention either.

“You’re still on that?” He nudges her side and she rolls her eyes, bumping her shoulder on his.

This should feel like taking Astrid back to his place for the first time, and it does, but the butterflies in his stomach are tired, more than tired. Suffering from insomnia, actually, because they absolutely didn’t get any rest while he slept on her lap.

She seems to doubt him for a second when he drops her hand and fishes his keys out of his pockets,
taking a step back and looking up at the apartments with wide eyes.

“Is something wrong?”

“No,” she watches the key easily turn in the lock before continuing, “this is just a nice place, for a guy who couldn’t afford frozen yogurt.”

“It was my dad’s,” he steps back to let her go first up the stairs, “it was paid off when I inherited it.”

“That explains it.” she smiles over her shoulder at him and he stumbles, catching himself on the handrail. They’re too close on the tiny landing as he unlocks the front door but it’s not close enough.

Of course, his phone rings right as he’s swinging the door open, still on full blaring volume from the hospital when he was worried he’d fall asleep in the waiting room when someone needed to reach him.

“Shit, sorry,” he frowns at the Caller ID as they step into the living room and vaguely recognizes the number.

“Who is it?” Astrid looks over his shoulder her face lights up with recognition, “oh, that’s Ruffnut.”

“Oh,” he swallows hard, wondering how much Astrid knows about the last time he saw Ruffnut, “I should get this but um, make yourself at home?”

Snotlout always sounds like an adult saying that to people he brings home, but Hiccup feels like he’s about to have to scramble for an adult to take the important phone call. But he is the adult, and for the first time in a long time, maybe ever, he doesn’t want to run from that.

“Sure,” she nods, looking absently at the poster above the couch while he picks up the phone.

“Hey Ruff, what’s up?”

“Is Astrid there?”

“Uh, yeah, I didn’t realize she’d hired me as her secretary though, I definitely didn’t accept without seeing the benefits package.” He shrugs and Astrid holds out her hand for the phone, seemingly understanding what he’s hearing.

“I’ll negotiate for you if you hand the phone over,” Ruffnut sounds almost panicky enough to drown out the suggestion, “don’t worry, you’re in good hands, I know all her terms.”

“Yes?” she asks, she nods, looking absently at the poster above the couch while he picks up the phone.

“Hey Ruff, what’s up?”

“Is Astrid there?”

“Uh, yeah, I didn’t realize she’d hired me as her secretary though, I definitely didn’t accept without seeing the benefits package.” He shrugs and Astrid holds out her hand for the phone, seemingly understanding what he’s hearing.

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“Yes?” she asks, Astrid reaches for his hand.

“Yeah,” he hands it over and Astrid holds it away from her ear for a second until Ruffnut is done with her evidently loud usual greeting. She listens for a second before sighing and sitting on the couch, hand over the receiving speaker for a second.

“Sorry, this might take a minute.”

“Yeah, that’s fine.” He sits on the other end of the couch to take off his shoes and watches out of the corner of his eye as Astrid does the same, punctuating Ruffnut’s chatter with a couple bored ‘uh-huh’ type sounds and rolling her eyes. She bites her lip when Ruffnut says something
particularly objectionable and curls her feet underneath her on the couch, fingers of her free hand fiddling absently with the patch on the arm’s old leather.

The comfort he felt waking up in the hospital with Astrid and Snotlout’s gentle bickering above him hits again but harder, closer, purer without hospital antiseptic smells. He wants Astrid curled on his couch, mildly annoyed but flicking impossibly fond eyes at him when she catches him staring more than he’s ever wanted a Grimborn letter he practically bankrupted himself for. He barely stops himself from blurting that out as he jumps to his feet, hands curled into awkward fists at his sides.

“I’m going to go take that shower really quick, ok? Cool, see you in a minute.”

He shuts the bathroom door behind him and sighs, not entirely sure that wasn’t a worse thing to blurt.
Chapter 21

“So I’m in the hospital lobby here to visit Snotlout, but I realize I don’t know how to explain to him that I know I was kind of dick to him with Eretson.” Ruffnut launches right into the crux of her problem and Astrid knows she doesn’t have much of a choice but to take a seat and deal with it. That is, if she wants Ruffnut to stop calling, which she does, so she blocks off the receiving speaker with her hand.

“Sorry, this might be a minute.” This is the furthest from murder she’s ever been alone with Hiccup, in private, behind a closed and thankfully locked door, and she wants it uninterrupted.

“Yeah, that’s fine.”

“And I didn’t realize I was even being a dick around Eretson, because I didn’t know that Snotlout even actually liked me, I thought we were just hooking up, but now he got shot and almost died and I don’t know if I have to pretend that I knew he liked me or that I like him, and it’s not that I don’t, I just didn’t know that was a thing he was expecting.”

“Uh-huh,” Astrid smiles apologetically at Hiccup when she catches him looking at her, barefoot and tired, eyes bright and shoulders on edge. It’s worse when she knows how soft his hair is and how he sounds mumbling half her name on the cusp of a dream.

“And am I just more of a bitch if I go apologize right now but I don’t actually like him when he’s not almost dying? Not that I care if I’m a bitch, he really should have talked to me if he didn’t want me hitting on other guys in front of him, not that I gave him much time to talk, and not that I was even really hitting on Eretson.”

“Mmmh,” Astrid nods, rolling her eyes conspiratorially at Hiccup and then frowning when he freezes, looking her up and down in soft, panicked way she’s not familiar with. She cocks her head to ask what’s wrong and his eyes linger on her socks for a second before he jumps to his feet.

“I was just intimidating the authority figure, it’s the Thorston trick—"

“I’m going to go take that shower really quick, ok? Cool, see you in a minute!” Hiccup announces before darting off into what she assumes is the bathroom and shutting the door behind him.

“—like what was I going to do when a detective with boa constrictors for arms started talking like I was a murder suspect? Go to jail? Not without a fight—""

The shower turns on with a creak of old pipes and Astrid swallows hard, eyes going wide as she stares at the door. It has a lock, but Hiccup didn’t lock it, but why would he? He knows she’s not the Grimborn killer, except she doubts that’s what’s on his mind right now.

He has no reason to lock the door, but he has no reason to leave it unlocked either, unless he was serious earlier about her joining him. She thought he was too upset to be serious about anything, but after the last couple months maybe they’ve had no choice to be serious while also upset.

“—and yeah, Snotlout is great, he’s got the chest and the dimples, both sets! But he didn’t even ask me if we were serious before getting shot—"

If Hiccup was serious about her joining him, how would that even work? With the missing foot, she means. On a bed, it wouldn’t be a problem but standing—
“—and I’m really worried about him, actually, because I feel like he’s yours and Tuff’s friend now too and I know you two like each other more than you like me—”

Ruffnut’s voice brings back a now months old relic of the concept of murder alley sex and the way Astrid blurted it out to him at Gruff’s, and he blushed and huffed and talked about draftiness with that awkward chin tilt that makes her laugh even when it shouldn’t. Even when nothing should be funny. And he put up curtains in her apartment, the apartment she doesn’t want to go back to because it feels like a signature on a contract she didn’t read. When he kissed her that time, he didn’t want to go back to the bedroom because of his horrible day, and she finds herself ranking surviving but wounded cousins against a disembodied foot being mailed to his apartment.

This apartment. The surprisingly homey apartment she didn’t expect, with traces of Hiccup on every wall and in every time worn line of the couch.

“Astrid? You there?” Ruffnut pauses her monologue long enough to check for an audience.

“Yeah, I’m here.” She clears her throat.

“You stopped humming at regular intervals.”

“Hiccup’s in the shower,” Astrid says, a little high pitched, and she curls her knees more tightly to her chest.

“Ok, so tell me how to not be a dick to a guy who just got shot quickly and I’ll let you get back to your…afternoon delight.”

Astrid checks the time and frowns because Ruffnut is right, it’s barely after four. Even after all that walking around, the sun is still high outside the wide window on the front of Hiccup’s apartment, the light making her feel vulnerable and safe at the same time.

“Can’t you just be nice?”

“Not that quickly,” Ruffnut snorts, “I don’t—I’ve never been nice to him.”

“He really liked that time you thought he was a stripper.” Astrid tries then frowns, thinking of Hiccup’s panicked face, “Except he’s not supposed to get his blood pressure up—”

“Then what the fuck am I doing here?” She sounds a little desperate, a little raw, and Astrid sighs, rubbing her temple and wondering whether it’s wrong to feel so comfortable on Hiccup’s couch.

“You’re trying to do the right thing.”

“Yeah, no, I don’t really do that.”

“Well, you’re trying to and I’m proud of you, so just…get up, go upstairs.”

“That’s not telling me what to say so that I’m not an asshole.” Ruffnut must be following direction anyway because Astrid hears the elevator door ding.

“Just say what you feel when you see him. I bitched about the Patriots, we had a nice talk.” Her heart twists thinking about how worried Snotlout was about Hiccup, and the way that Hiccup snored on her lap, eyes squinting with dreams she wondered if she should try and keep away.

“What I feel? What I feel is awkward to be in a hospital when I don’t even have a boyfriend and no one ever considers that’s on purpose—oh my God.”
The shower cuts off and old pipes drain with a gurgle in the bathroom wall.

She took too long and missed yet another chance.

No, he was probably just taking the shower he was excited enough for to be roused from his dedicated post at Snotlout’s bedside. She hopes he feels better, if better is even possible for him right now. She swallows back against the selfish disappointment rising in her throat and focuses on finishing this conversation.

“Grisly’s in his room,” Ruffnut whispers, “I’m going in.”

“No!” Astrid sits up straight, all of Hiccup’s theories rushing back into her head. That’s not worth the risk, no matter how small, “just—”

“Hey, rough night at work?” Ruffnut says, her voice a couple of feet from the phone. There’s a rustle and an uncomfortable undertone to an inarticulate voice. “Hey, you can stay, no reason to run—”

“Ruff!” Snotlout’s voice is relieved enough that Astrid doesn’t feel guilty hanging up when the bathroom door opens.

Hiccup emerges in a cloud of steam, one crutch under his left arm, a white towel tied around his waist. Low on his waist. Low enough that she can see the shadow of his hipbones in the half sunlit room and the start of a chestnut trail of hair down from his navel. His right hand holds the towel up as he takes a one-legged step forward, but it really doesn’t do anything but draw her attention downwards with a freckled arm and long fingers.

“Everything ok?” He asks, frowning, hair slicked back from his forehead and making his eyes look greener and his brows darker.

She nods, “yeah, it’s…fine. Everything’s fine.” Her eyes snag on the ripple in his lean muscled shoulder when he moves the crutch forward. His chest clenches as he stabilizes himself, the whole of his stomach tensing and guiding her eyes to the V of his hips, cut off by the towel.

His mouth twitches, suddenly serious and hopeful, and she swallows hard.

“Sorry about that,” he gestures at the bathroom with his chin, the sharp line of his jaw free of most of his hospital stubble. She must have not heard the trimmer over the running water.

“It’s fine, it took longer to get Ruffnut off the phone than I thought,” she laughs, cheeks heating up when Hiccup smiles, a private sheepish smile, “she’s visiting Snotlout, apparently, so that’s… unusually nice of her.”

“I realized some things,” he starts, taking a couple steps with his crutch that make her want to take him somewhere safe. Somewhere he won’t need the towel. “You’re right about Grimborn, or—can I show you something?”

“Sure,” she bites her lip, trying to focus on his face but being distracted by water dripping off of his hair and down his side, catching on the barely visible line of his rib and gleaming.

“Could you get the door?” He points at a closed door next to the couch with his elbow, looking almost apologetically at the hand currently occupied by holding his towel up, like he’s embarrassed he doesn’t have three arms. She jumps up before she can tell him it’s fine with her if he frees up a hand.
“Yeah, sure, no problem.” She takes a deep breath facing the door, trying to force her heartbeat to slow down as Hiccup follows, the uneven sound of crutch and bare foot familiar in a way it shouldn’t be.

The old door swings open to reveal an office with a haphazardly dusted hardwood desk and two walls lined entirely with bookshelves. All but one is filled with books, most of them old, and the last has a stack of file boxes coated in a thick layer of dust. The wood around the window frame is chipped, like for the last century someone has been pushing the leather office chair back against it a little too emphatically, excited by some discovery or angry with a dead end.

“My dad’s office,” Hiccup explains, shoulder bumping against hers as he walks around her and through the door, toes sinking into the thick rug under the desk. The end of his left leg is barely visible under the edge of the towel, a clinical scar along the end of a smooth, rounded limb, and she’s as curious about it as the wiry flex of his shoulders, for entirely different reasons.

Mostly, she wonders how he’s naked and she’s the one feeling this vulnerable.

“Your dad’s?” She walks up to the bookshelf and starts looking through titles. There are six copies of the Admiral Haddock book he loaned her, all different editions. The next shelf is full of books about the history of Berk and the surrounding area, most of them old, some of them with what look like Norse subtitles on the bindings.

There’s a row of what look like magazines, but she pulls one out to see a program from a Viggo Grimborn themed musical put on by a Berkian theater company in the mid-eighties. Flipping through it, there are snippets of the songs and an advertisement from a local casket maker promising their product will ‘keep all your bits together, no matter what’.

She snorts, “this looks more like your office.”

“That’s the thing,” he laughs, low in his throat and closer than she thought he was, and the program bumps against his chest when she jumps and turns to face him. He doesn’t step back though, leaning his armpit on the crutch to take another book off of the shelf and show it to her. It’s some kind of journal, written in sloping, careful cursive and she trades him, flipping through it. “That was my great-great—some number of greats, I don’t know, grandpa, he was pretty annoyed at the Grimborn thing getting so much publicity.” He takes it back, gently setting a bookmark and putting it carefully back in its place on the shelf.

A few surprisingly graceful hops sideways let him lean back against the desk with his crutch beside him and she follows, standing in front of him and trying to read his expression. She’s used to his face being loud, unreserved, but now he’s thinking too hard, in his own way as much as hers.

A line of goosebumps highlights the sharp line of his collar bone and Astrid wants to touch him the way she touched that journal, reverent but with the intent to discover it. He doesn’t stop her when she tries, inhaling sharply and looking at her with serious, suddenly dilated eyes as she presses her hand to his hastening heartbeat.

“Last person I thought I’d ever take after,” he laughs, sharp but unburdened, compared to earlier. “I just kept thinking about what you said about me not being a Grimborn-ologist, and—well, if it’s not about Grimborn, what is it about?”

“Hiccup,” she’s not sure what she’s asking for, or if it’s a question, but he sets his jaw and nods purposefully at her.

“Let me get there, ok?” He looks at her like he’s falling but he’s just determined enough to get his
feet underneath him and jump. “Just—if it’s not about Grimborn, it’s about what everything else is about.” He waves at the bookshelves and she lets her hand slide down and around his side, every nerve on edge when he grins at her, “I’m not good with change. Even the city changing feels like it’s betraying—but I can’t stop it. You’re right, this is my office now, full of my things and I made it that way while I was trying to keep it the same.” He tucks her hair behind her ear with warm fingertips, cold knuckles brushing along her jaw and she shivers, “and the thing is, I thought I was happy in my holding pattern, and then I met you and…and I want you on my couch, irritated with your best friend and I want you looking at my books like you respect what they’re made out of and —”

“I don’t think I’ve told you this,” she grabs his wrist to stop his fingers from tracing the side of her neck, too much and not nearly enough, “but it drives me crazy when you take these big, long detours without telling me where we’re going.”

He laughs and leans in, kissing her too gently for the way she responds, fisting her hand in his damp hair when he catches himself on the desk. It must be his crutch that clatters to the floor, because his towel is still annoyingly in place as he deepens the kiss. His hands curl in her shirt at her waist, pulling her against him with easy confidence that’s too casual for how it makes her heart race.

“Maybe that’s what I’m going for,” he mutters against her cheek, and the curl of heat in her stomach borders on painful. He doesn’t give her time to be embarrassed about the borderline desperate moan his words drag out of her, smiling into her skin as he kisses her neck, enjoying the detour entirely too much.

“I can see that.” Her frustration makes him chuckle, the ghost of his teeth across her pulse.

“It’s not intentional—not that I mind driving you crazy,” he mumbles a little breathless, “I just wanted, no, needed to talk to you—“

She cuts him off with another kiss, dragging her hand down his chest and feeling his stomach muscles twitch when she lingers there, thwarted by a wad of wet towel. His hand cups her face, fingers so gentle in her hair that she snaps, yanking the side of his towel to get it out of her way. It doesn’t work like she hopes, damp fabric catching on the desk with a creak of old wood.

“Hey,” Hiccup laughs, hand on her shoulder to stabilize himself as he hops sideways slightly, the towel dipping on his hips but stubbornly covering him.

“Is that not where we’re going?” She pauses, fingers clammy against his stomach until he blushes, eyebrows raised.

“Yes, definitely,” he looks down between them and swallows hard, “of course. I’m not in a hurry, though,” his voice dips to a husky whisper and he’s tender again, brushing her hair behind her ear.

She snaps, kissing down the side of his neck and biting the offensively sharp line of his collarbone as she purposefully undoes the knot in his towel. He gasps when her lips trail down his chest, his hands braced on her shoulders as she anchors her thumbs in the divots above his hipbones. She drops to her knees on the plush rug under the desk and Hiccup groans, leaning back against it with a sudden force that makes it creak again.

“Astrid,” he shudders when she wraps one hand around the base of him, smiling to herself against his hip. For how hilarious he found her frustration a minute ago, at least part of him seems to agree with the sentiment, throbbing and almost scalding against her palm when she strokes. She kisses across his thigh, teasing, and he shudders, fingertips digging into her shoulders for balance. “You
“Don’t have to—”

“No,” she looks up at him, hand that’s not wrapped around his length reaching around to grab his ass, “I really do.”

“Oh God,” he moans, but he relaxes too, one of his hands letting go of her shoulder and gripping the desk as he exhales a deep, shaky breath.

Hiccup has a way of surprising her. Constantly, infuriatingly. Sweetly and comfortingly. But when she kisses the tip of him almost chastely before taking him unceremoniously into her mouth, she’s surely holding her own on that front.

He swears under his breath, hips twitching forward when she starts to move and she braces one hand against his hip to hold him still. She understands his impulse to make this last after the months of buildup, but she can’t say that she agrees, not when she needs him to understand her urgency. Not when he’s groaning and trying to restrain himself from flexing forward, his stomach twitching as his hand fumbles in her hair.

She pulls back to breathe, kissing along the length of him and pumping slowly with her hand, twisting her wrist and nuzzling his hip. He smells like soap and unmistakably like Hiccup, all hospital anxiety thankfully washed away in the shower. When she flicks her tongue against the underside of his head he bites his lip and groans, the desk creaking again.

“Ok?” She sucks for another teasing second, reveling in revenge for his comments about driving her crazy when he twitches, hips bumping off of the desk.

“Not going to last,” he huffs, brushing her hair back from her temple, still reverent and sending a warm thrill down her spine as she nods and takes him back into her mouth, moving with purpose now. “Fuck, Astrid…”

She murmurs comfortingly around him, free hand stroking his thigh as she drags him over the edge. He moans, overwhelmed and nasal, his knee bobbling even as she stands up and wraps her arms around his waist.

“I….” He sighs, resting his forehead against hers, eyes closed and breathing hard, and she kisses the tip of his nose, “You…”

“I was in a hurry.”

“Something like that,” he laughs, sliding his hand to her hip and pivoting, urging for her to sit on the edge of the desk. He keeps his balance with a hand on her knee but moves it upwards, slowly, thumb tracing the seam on her inner thigh as he kisses under her ear. “I just kept waiting for the right time, for some magical time where nothing could mess this up, but that’s the thing. I’m always going to worry about messing this up,” he pulls back and tucks her hair behind her ear, thumb swiping over her cheek. His eyes are black, ringed with the tiniest sliver of emerald, and she thinks this is the most serious she’s ever seen him outside of a hospital.

Too serious entirely, considering how much tension he just released.

“Hey,” she puts a comforting hand on his cheek while the other traces down to his ass and squeezes, “the only way you’re going to mess this up is if you don’t stop talking, right now.”

He narrows his eyes, corner of his lips twitching as he glances down at his own chest and the towel piled around his foot. “So, I should go get dressed now, right?”
Apparently, even after all this time, she underestimated his ability to joke while taking things seriously.

“Absolutely not,” she squeezes and any comment about Ruffnut getting there first dies in her throat when he hooks a hand under her knee and tugs her close enough to demonstrate the height of the desk.

“Then I think you’re behind here,” his hand slides under her shirt, fingers tracing the line of her bra against her chest. She gasps, knees tight around his hips as she tries to get her shirt off without allowing any more space between them. He hisses in her ear, fumbling then succeeding with her bra clasp when his hips twitch forward against her. “Zipper,” he groans, face pressed into her shoulder as his fingers tweak a pebbled nipple.

“Sure,” she kisses his temple, inhaling the smell of his shampoo as she inches her shirt up. He can get her zipper, that would be helpful.

“Hnnn, no, I mean grinding into your zipper is—”

“Oh, sorry,” she lets go, rushing to unbutton her pants. The zipper sticks and she swears, hands shaking when Hiccup shoves her shirt up to her neck and ducks down to kiss across her chest, fingers too warm on the sides of her ribs. “Hiccup…”

“Just a second.” He pushes her to lay flat on the desk, swirling his tongue around her nipple when she arches away from the cold wood. When her hands slide down his back he grinds forward again and flinches, forehead on her sternum. “Zipper, fuck.”

“Then let me get them off—”

“Not used to head starts,” he kisses down her stomach, hands tugging at her zipper for a second before he gets it loose. “There,” he pulls her pants down and tugs her underwear with them, dropping them vaguely to the side.

She’s barely on her elbows when he’s kissing her again, only pausing to help her get her shirt over her head. She fumbles her bra off, finally as naked as he is as he leans over her, half-hard length of him pressed against her inner thigh. And for once, his tendency to take his time is appreciated as his fingers trace over every inch of her, like she’s a primary source document he spent months hunting down.

He pauses to catalogue new and important information, taking mental notes for future tours. He notes the way she gasps when his thumb brushes over the ticklish spot on her knee, he lingers over the details when her hands tangle in his hair as he nuzzles the sensitive curve under her breast. And when he finally touches her, long fingers dipping carefully between her legs, she can feel him planning a route meant to maximize suspense.

“At least part of you is in a hurry now,” she sits up, one arm around his neck as the other reaches between them to grasp his length.

“I’m fine,” he grins but moves anyway, finger slipping into her as his thumb searches outside, rubbing when he finds her clit, “still recuperating, really.” He kisses her neck, adding another finger and moving his wrist intentionally.

It’s good, but it’s not enough, not when more is in her hand, throbbing in her grip like it’s teasing her. Not when she’s thought of this for so long and so far, reality has built on her expectation and her blood is buzzing under her skin.
“I know it’s not the archives,” he nibbles at her earlobe, voice husky as his hips twitch forward into her grip, his hand moving faster, “and it’s severely lacking Berk Enquirers…” His fingers curl and the tension in her core builds, starting to culminate. “But it’s not an insignificant collection.”

“Are you trying to turn me on by talking about the Berk Enquirer?” Her laugh turns into a moan when he presses harder on her clit, his teeth barely grazing her shoulder.

“Is it working?” He chuckles, raspy and heated before kissing her, distracted and sloppy, nipping her lip when she strokes him a little faster.

“Condom?” She gasps, forehead against his. Then she remembers his leg and continues, “I’ll get it —”

“No,” he moves away from her all at once, leaving her throbbing and propping herself up on the desk with one arm as he holds onto the corner of it to lean down and get his crutch, “don’t move, you on the desk like that,” he takes two limping steps to the bookshelf and reaches into a cigar box to pull out a foil square, “really embodying a lot of fantasies I hadn’t quite put together yet.”

“You keep your condoms in your dad’s office?” She teases when he hands it to her to open, propping his crutch against the chair like he’s anticipating the desk moving.

“My office, remember?” He rests his hand on her thigh and resumes rubbing her clit, not enough to get her there, just enough for her hands to shake and she swears, fumbling with the condom. “Need help?” He kisses her before she can answer.

The wrapper finally accepts defeat and she rolls the rubber circle onto him, lining him up in the same motion. The hand on her thigh slides downwards, hooking her knee over his hip and holding it there as he pushes forward with a drag that makes her toes curl.

She moans, legs around his waist as he braces one hand on her hip and the other on the desk just behind her, holding her there as he finds his rhythm. More firm than fast, as intentional as his lips are when they find the sensitive spot on her neck that he catalogued earlier. Her heels dig into his ass when he finds the right angle, nudging her towards the edge with every jolt of his hips against hers.

“Astrid,” he groans her name, hand on her hip sliding up her side to cup her breast, thumb swiping over her nipple, and his pace falters when she bucks against him, “you’re so, I—fuck…” He swears under his breath when she reaches between them, hand working where they’re joined, chasing the cresting wave of molten pleasure blooming in her chest.

She cries out when she gets there, fingernails digging into his shoulder as her back arches. He kisses her, swallowing the sound and running a soothing hand up her back, even as his thrusts quicken, rougher around the edges. The desk is creaking in time and Astrid moans, the continued sensation almost too much while feeling comes back to her toes.

“Ok?” Hiccup checks in, lips hot against the side of her neck, hand between her shoulder blades holding her close even as he starts to lose rhythm, muscles in his back twitching when she slides her hands down to his ass.

“Better than ok,” she assures him, kissing his sweat slick shoulder and squeezing his waist with her knees.

He thrusts one last time with a deep, drawn out groan, holding her tight to him while his hips twitch twice, the throbbing inside of her peaking then dulling with a slow, glowing warmth.
“That was,” he lifts his head and apparently finishing his thought isn’t as important as kissing her, his hand tangling in her hair as he pulls out slowly before stumbling, barely catching the corner of the desk, “sorry—”

“Sorry?” She winces, tugging his hand free of her hair and rubbing her scalp, “that’s not how I’d describe it.”

“Me either,” he reaches for his crutch and tucks it back under his arm, “considering it was so great I apparently forgot that my foot wasn’t just numb.” He laughs, joking about things that shouldn’t be funny with that infectious ease that makes it ok to laugh. “As great as that was, I think cuddling on a desk would be pretty uncomfortable.”

“And I’ve got to clean up,” she stands up, knees a little less than solid and butt sore from perching on the edge of the desk.

“Right, sure, you uh, know where the bathroom is since,” he gestures at the towel on the ground, “so I’ll meet you in my room? It’s the one that the NFL store didn’t vomit all over.”

“And you’ll be there.” She blushes and feels stupid for blushing while standing naked in front of someone she just had sex with, but Hiccup blushes too, smiling and nodding at her.

“Yeah, I’ll be there.”

He doesn’t bother with the towel to get to his room, so Astrid risks going to the bathroom naked, assuming he knows more about the probability of peeping Toms than she does. After cleaning up and borrowing a dab of toothpaste on her finger, she skirts the wall to the only open door she hasn’t been through and sees Hiccup on one side of a queen-sized bed, crutch propped beside him.

“You’re freezing,” he curls up around her as soon as she slides under the covers, rubbing his too warm palm on her side until she tugs his arm around her, sinking gratefully into the mattress.

“I’m fine,” she understates, smiling to herself when he kisses the back of her ear, knees tucked behind hers, “curious though.”

“Yeah?” He cups her breast without real intent, snuggling closer and peppering kisses along her shoulders.

“What exact fantasies did I invoke by sitting on a desk naked?” She rolls onto her back to see his reaction, laughing at the color high in his cheeks as he runs a hand back through impossibly rumpled sex hair.

“I didn’t mean to say that out loud,” he tries, arm over her waist as he hides his embarrassment in the crook of her neck, “and it was the only thing that I didn’t mean to say that slipped out, so I think I should get a pass.”

“Hmm,” she pretends to think about it for a second, “I disagree.”

“I saw that coming,” he sighs, rolling back onto his side to look at her, oblique afternoon light from the window highlighting freckles across his temple. “It wasn’t just the desk, ok? It was the whole thing with the office and the way you touch books and—”

“The way I touch books? Is that why you can’t control yourself when you visit me at work?” She blushes when his smile widens, gap tooth more adorable than it should be when her center is still half throbbing. “What?”
“It’s you who can’t control yourself.”

“That’s not true,” she sputters, “I seem to remember a certain incident with Encyclopedias was your fault—”

“Because of my sexy chin grab, I know, I’ll take credit for that one,” he strokes her jaw with a feather light fingertip and she glares at him. “You know those less well-adjusted Grimborn-ologists I told you about? Some of them get a little…revved up talking about murder, and it always creeped me out, but if it’s not about Grimborn, then it’s not weird for me to be really charmed by the way you get handsy around old books.”

“I do not,” her face heats up and he only smiles wider.

“You do,” he teases, kissing the corner of her frown and laughing when it doesn’t budge, “or now you do, now that you’ve decided you like me. Before you still got so passionate, it was just—”

“Fury at the guy stalking my apartment?” She rolls her eyes, feeling vulnerable and attached and safe in a way that should scare her, just how following near strangers down dark alleys should have scared her. It didn’t then, and it doesn’t now. “How does that all lead to a fantasy of having sex on your desk?”

“Well,” he kisses her shoulder, hand sliding down to her hip, coaxing her to roll to face him, “there’s no Fishlegs to interrupt us.”
“I love you,” Hiccup whispers under his breath, heart racing as he carefully brushes a lock of hair back from Astrid’s face. It was tangled in her eyelashes and stuck to her lips as she snored, and it only seems decent to set it gently behind her ear.

She’s impossibly more beautiful when she’s asleep, all twitching eyebrows and soft, tired cheeks. He pulls himself closer to her, dropping a cautious kiss on her hair-covered forehead and hoping she doesn’t wake up.

“I love you.” The second time he tries on something he’s never worn before, it’s braver, if not louder.

She snorts in her sleep, burrowing her face into his shoulder, and he laughs under his breath.

The last twelve or so hours have been some of the best of his life.

In the shower, he orbited uselessly around everything she said and knew nothing could make it make sense except talking to her. He didn’t expect her reaction though, given, well, the fact that she’s embarrassingly perfect and he’s definitely not. He never could have expected what it would mean to see her naked and wanting on his desk in a room full of his books.

Hiccup’s sexual encounters can be sorted into two neat sections: those who he would never show his books and those who upon being shown his books would ask him if he’d ever killed anyone.

Last night was so much more than either.

Even though Hiccup has never said ‘I love you’ to anyone but his parents and not even them post age nineteen, he knew he couldn’t say it when the words sublimated in his brain. ‘I love you’ isn’t a thing to be said for the first time around any coital activity, pre or mid or post. Isn’t there usually a present of some kind involved? Or some sort of event? Maybe he’s just imagining an event as a way to keep from blurting it out at her the next time she smiles or scowls or looks at him with that brave worried strength.

“I love you, Astrid,” he mutters against her hair, arms wrapped around her shoulders, sighing when her leg reflexively curls around his hip. He’s still off schedule, after years of night tours and a few days in the hospital with Snotlout. She’s probably lagging too, but either way it led to a night of napping with occasional periods of mutual lucidity.

Yes, there was more sex. Laughing, comfortable sex and sleepy touching that made him feel closer to her than he ever has to anyone, but that’s not what he’s dwelling on now. Mostly, they talked. Not about anything in particular, they just talked and laughed and cuddled and the flicker of ‘I love you’ he’d felt twice in his office fed off of every word and bloomed into a compulsion he doesn’t know what to do with.

He watched her dream, her face twitching without her intentionally rigid expression to contain it and the concept of loving her expanded so wholly that he thought his heart was going to explode. He woke up to her kissing his back and those dangerous thoughts about the future grew hooks and dug in.

“I think I love you,” he whispers against the top of her head, hugging her tighter, “More than think, I think I’m sure I love you.”
She grumbles in her sleep and rolls away from him, pressing her face into the pillow, profile hidden by a cloud of tangled blonde. Her back rises and falls with her breathing, a freckle on her shoulder blade moving just in and out of the shadow the streetlight casts as it peeks through the blinds.

He should let her sleep.

But if he lets her sleep, he’s going to spend the next hour whispering ‘I love you’ at a sleeping person, and at some point that gets creepy, no matter how pure his intentions, so he should probably wake her up.

“Astrid,” he says her name in a sing-song tone, brushing her hair away from her ear and kissing the corner of her jaw. No response. “It’s time to wake up,” he continues, lips against the back of her neck, hand on her ribs.

She groans, pushing up onto her elbows and glaring around the room with sleepy, squinting eyes, “what time is it?”

“A little after four,” he strokes her arm, seemingly unable to stop touching her now that he’s started.

“That’s not time to get up,” she shakes her head, curling back up on her side and facing him.

The truth is as obvious as bold, black text on a page. He loves her. He loves her bedhead and the way she’s cocooning in his sheets, uncovering his foot as she claims more blankets. He loves how she’s scowling at him now, maybe self-conscious even though it’s buried under sleepy irritation.

It is entirely too soon to be thinking like this, but timelines have never stopped him before.

“What?” She asks when he’s apparently stared too long, and maybe he never had a chance to avoid being creepy.

“I…” He sits up, pulling the sheets across his lap and cringing when his stomach growls audibly. “I’m hungry, apparently.”

“We skipped dinner,” she informs him like she was previously aware of the transgression.

“It didn’t seem important at the time,” he raises an eyebrow, and she deflates.

“I’ll get dressed.”

“I hate that idea,” he blurts and she smiles a private, grumpy smile that makes his heart jolt. He loves her. “I’ll figure it out, ok?” He rolls reluctantly out of bed and pulls on a pair of boxers from the clean laundry basket in the corner, grabbing his crutch and standing up.

The fridge is predictably empty. Hiccup shouldn’t be surprised, as Snotlout was a little preoccupied with almost dying and that clearly led to him skipping his usual Sunday grocery errand, but he was hoping for a miracle. He doesn’t think it’d be particularly charming to offer some of Snotlout’s protein drink and everything else in the cupboard is canned and dusty.

When Snotlout first joined the force, there were a few months when he continually got ‘Protect and Serve’ wrong and announced ‘Protect and Provide’ at nearly every opportunity. It wasn’t a hit at the precinct, but it really seemed to work for him with girls, and as much as Hiccup teased him about it, the phrase is sticking in his head now.
Not that Astrid needs protection, she never has, and he knows she doesn’t explicitly need to be provided for, but it feels important. Breakfast feels important, especially because he takes at least half the credit for missing dinner and he has absolutely hit his hospital food limit for the century.

“No luck,” he walks back into his bedroom, feeling more self-conscious from the way Astrid looks at his shoulders than her curious expression when she examines the leg that he retrieved from the bathroom. “I’ll go get breakfast.”

“I can come with you,” she insists through a yawn that turns her tone unconvincing and he leans over to kiss her on the cheek.

“Get some more sleep,” he sits on the edge of the bed to pull his jeans on, “I’ll be back in a bit.”

“That’s a pretty good offer.”

“Text me if you want anything in particular,” he pulls on the first shirt he finds in the clean laundry basket and doesn’t bother with socks. As willing as he is to do this, it’s already taking too long when Astrid is settling back into his bed.

“Can’t,” she sighs, “my phone’s still at my apartment.”

“Right,” he rubs his hands together, “I can stop by your place and grab it really quick, if you want.”

Again, Astrid doesn’t need protection, but she wasn’t looking forward to going back to her apartment. He’s not exactly either, but after the Grimborn revelations of the day before he feels the need to examine it. It’s important to know for sure if the wall outside her courtyard still has some bone deep connection to the past, even if it means encountering another scrubbed clean patch of pavement.

“Are you sure?” She frowns, propped up on one elbow, sheet slipping slightly down her chest.

“Yeah, there’s a bakery a couple blocks from your place that’s probably open now. It used to be a workhouse kitchen and they still bake their bread in the Victorian cast iron oven—“

“Come here,” she pulls him down into a kiss when he listens, hand firm on the back of his neck as her tongue dips into his mouth. And she’s warm and smells like his laundry detergent, her other hand on his hip, fingers slipping through his belt loop.

Her stomach growls and he pulls away with a laugh.

“If I don’t go now, it’s not going to happen,” he brushes his lips across her forehead and tugs the blanket up before he can look down and lose the fragile scraps of his resolve. He loves her, she’s hungry, he wants that to be his problem. “Where are your keys?”

“In my pants pocket,” she holds the blanket to her chest even as her eyes flick down to his lips, “on the floor of your office.”

“Oh my God, I’m going.” He takes a big, purposeful step back, running his hand through his impossible hair, “before I—nope, not going to say it. I’ll be back in a bit.”

“Before you what?” She laughs after him as he leaves the room and he bites his lip to keep from answering her. “Come on, that’s not fair.”

“I’ll tell you when I get back, ok?” He says as he plucks her keys out of her jeans pocket.
Maybe he will.

Astrid’s all about complete information, isn’t she?

They exchange one last goodbye as he leaves through the front door and locks it behind him, double checking the doorknob. Just two days ago, he was avoiding coming home, scared that he’d once again be left with a pile of things that someone wasn’t ever coming back to, but now he can barely make himself leave. The apartment feels more like a home with her in it, more than it has since his dad died, and he might be alarmed at how badly he wants her to stay if he hadn’t already thrown emotional caution to the wind.

The hallway is colder when mentally compared with how warm he knows his bedroom is and he almost unlocks the door and abandons the idea of leaving entirely. Maybe the bakery does Uber Eats.

But then Astrid still wouldn’t have her phone, which would be pretty inconvenient for her, considering she’d have no way to tell anyone that a crazy person just admitted his undying love for her after they slept together one time. And that said crazy person has half convinced himself that asking her to move in is a decent idea.

Ruffnut clearly needs an update, given how the fallout might change her fake wedding planning.

“The walk will be good,” he mutters to himself, forcing himself down the stairs and out onto the quiet street.

It rained at some point in the night, the pavement still damp as the first rays of morning sunlight hit it, and Hiccup takes a deep breath, clearing the Astrid infused air from his lungs. The thought that he loves her doesn’t leave with it and he shakes his head, heading towards her apartment.

He knows it’s too early to say, hell, it’s really too early to feel, but most people go on a slew of dates before they have to be a murder suspect with someone. The Berkian criminal justice system is far from perfect, but it is a legendary bonding experience. Not to mention that he doesn’t know where he’d put ‘occasionally finds disemboweled victims of serial killers’ on a dating profile, because it’s not really intentional enough to be a hobby, but it’s a definite obstacle for his free time.

But excuses he’s leaning on to delay the inevitable do nothing to the truth of it.

He loves Astrid. He probably loved her the second she whacked him in the head with a toothbrush, his fear of going to jail for harassment just got in the way of him realizing it. Well, that and the fact he never would have thought he’d have a chance or that she’d look at his books like they’re something special.

Whenever he discovers something true, he always wants to share it as widely as possible, and the impulse threatens to overwhelm him. If she had her phone, he’d probably text her, like that’s not worse than someone blurting it out the first time she gets them naked.

Hiccup takes the next right without really thinking, ducking onto an old shortcut and relaxing when the old alley’s shadow embraces him like a centuries old echo chamber built for more than Grimborn. The city still feels alive, creaky in the early morning but willing to shake off another wave of violence and keep trudging forward. The brick is cool and damp from the rain, smudging rust colored dust onto Hiccup’s fingertips as he trails them along the side of the nearest building.

He doesn’t think about how close he is to the second Grimborn site until he sees Gruffnut standing outside of his bar’s back door and dusting a two-foot-tall copper tank.
“Fuck!” He jumps and Gruffnut jumps too, almost knocking the tank off of the table it’s on, barely managing to catch it with his very much alive hand.

“What is it?” Gruffnut looks around, spinning in a circle trying to check behind his shoulder, “you look like you’ve seen a ghost. And I don’t trust that old Teddy isn’t coming to even the score after I ousted him to the police.”

Right. Teddy Roosevelt. Eretson’s face, unamused above a binder of nonsense that Hiccup accidentally dropped months ago in another alley that was just becoming reacquainted with blood. A binder of nonsense that Gruffnut’s creepily identical cousin gave Astrid to give to him.

“You’re Tuffnut,” Hiccup claps his hand over his heart, willing it back into his chest.

“Who else would I be?” He affirms reality a little more when he goes back to cleaning. Gruffnut never cleaned anything, he definitely wouldn’t start after being literally caught dead.

“Is that an antique still?” Hiccup asks, distracted by the copper pot gleaming in the low light.

“It’s still an antique alright,” Tuffnut says, “an antique something, I don’t know, it’s shiny though.”

“No, it’s a still,” he clarifies, wiping dust off of a curl of copper pipe twisting up from the tank like a spout.

“It is still, yes, it’s an inanimate object that I’m not currently lending any animation to.” Tuff nods, giving Hiccup an eerily Snotlout-like look of surprise that Hiccup is managing to function while being so stupid. “Maybe you’re the ghost. Did my sister kill you after you ruined your fake marriage? Because I’ve got my own reasons to get revenge on Ruffnut, buddy, I can’t be your vengeance liaison to the world of the living.”

“That’s—she told you about—never mind,” Hiccup shakes his head, pointing at the copper tank, “this is a still, it’s a piece of equipment used to make alcohol.”

“Make alcohol,” Tuffnut rolls his eyes, “right, if making alcohol is possible, why would anyone buy it at a bar?”

“Well, where does the bar get it?”

“It was all here when I showed up.” He frowns, “but when the bar runs out, where will I get more? Oh right, the store…but where does the store get it?”

“I should get going, Tuff,” Hiccup interrupts the runaway train of thought and Tuffnut nods.

“Right, sure.” Tuffnut nods, “oh, by the way, have you heard from Astrid at all? I haven’t heard anything since I dropped her off at the hospital yesterday.”

“Oh,” Hiccup blushes, rubbing the back of his neck, “yeah, she’s actually umm, at my place, so…”

“Right,” he winks, “and I’m ‘doing my homework so I don’t fail out of grad school’. I get you.”

“Whatever that means,” Hiccup says, waving Tuffnut off with a laugh and one last look over his shoulder to assess whether he’s seeing things or not.

He avoids the alley exit where Gruffnut’s body was found, taking a slightly longer route and skirting condo property, keeping an eye out for cameras. There’s one, but it’s pointing towards the
docks instead of down the narrow path heading vaguely towards Astrid’s apartment building, so it doesn’t alter his course.

Winding through still dark alleys is another kind of coming home, truly separate from Grimborn for the first time, but still comforting. Another thing returning to normal after the end of the copy cat killer’s spree makes Hiccup feel like he an breathe again, especially since the new normal includes Astrid.

If he tells her he loves her, she doesn’t have to say it back. He knows it’s ridiculously early, by any standard, he wouldn’t expect it. The fact that she’s impossible to scare off makes him brave. Brave enough to be stupid, probably.

When he finds the street again, he’s looking at the back door to her building, the one he walked her back to the morning after the first murder. The day they saw Dave. If any of the tourists knew about that, it would be swarming with them.

Part of the Houdini phase was about fame. Notoriety. The irony of wanting fame for being the best at disappearing isn’t lost on him, especially now that someone invisible is getting famous for the worst reasons.

The wall outside her courtyard just looks like a wall. It’s old but cleanly built, the bricks rectangular from their mold and entirely, sparkling clean. No chalk writing, no blood stained asphalt. Power-washing removes almost as much history as a new slew of murders does. People more interested in murder than history clear away the rest, paving the road for copycat killers in their wake.

The building’s back door unlocks with the second key he tries and he counts the steps up to Astrid’s floor, glad he separated this pilgrimage from getting her home safe after their midnight tour. He knows that Gobber does his best as a landlord, but the staircase is still badly suffering from a well-intentioned renovation in the mid-nineteen-eighties and Hiccup feels like he’s wading into some bus terminal rejuvenated for the new decade with geometric carpet.

It’s not just the neighborhood, it’s really not a great building. Honestly, it was the condo of the eighteen eighties, just a pile of rectangles cobbled together because people were flocking to an idea of a city without thinking about the consequences. The most remarkable thing about it was the murder committed here, and that doesn’t seem so remarkable anymore.

Astrid’s apartment door doesn’t look like Elizabeth Smith’s.

It looks like a door he approached with a book in the rain with sweaty palms. A door he paced outside thinking about when he was five minutes early for a midnight tour.

A shitty door with a cheap new lock that makes his heart ache.

It’s too soon to say ‘I love you’ but is it too soon to ask her to move in? She gets along with Snotlout and that’s most of the hurdle, isn’t it? Plus, his place is nicer, less soulless even before Astrid infuses soul into it. He wonders what Gobber charges for rent and almost texts him to ask before catching himself and re-committing to the task at hand.

Phone. Breakfast. Astrid.


He almost knocks, even if it’s just symbolic, but that would be a step back he doesn’t want to take so he slides the most worn key into the knob.
It doesn’t turn.

Maybe there’s a thump inside or maybe that’s just his heart as the air in the hallway suddenly goes still and stale.

The knob turns.

Someone on the other side of the door pulls it open and Hiccup is stuck staring at Mr. Grisly in a familiar top hat and long wool coat, grinning with a face finally thawed from its usual permafrost.

“It took you long enough, Hiccup,” Mr. Grisly produces a pair of handcuffs from his pocket and slaps one ring too tight around Hiccup’s wrist before locking the other half around the doorknob. The motion is not so much practiced as it is nonchalant, someone smacking a fly that just landed too close to their food.

Mr. Grisly takes a step backwards like a circus ringleader in the center ring, twirling a knife like a ceremonial cane. Then he rotates Astrid’s only chair to reveal a blonde woman lashed to it with duct tape. Her hair shines painful, familiar gold as he stands behind her and stabs the knife decisively into her neck, dragging sideways before she can scream.

The chair shields him from the blood.

It doesn’t shield Hiccup.

He coughs, she dies. Quickly, historically, choking without substance as the fabric of the red chair deepens to truly match the fully closed soundproof curtains. He gags. His heart would stop if it slowed because all he can think about is Astrid, warm and alive in that same chair. Of her soft and sleepy an hour ago.

Was there time for Grisly to go back to his place?

He should have told her. He never should have left.

“You had to know it was always going to come to this,” Grisly says, holding the woman’s face up by her hair. She’s not Astrid and relief tastes like bile and someone else’s blood. “Oh, you didn’t?”

“Enlighten me.” Hiccup barely recognizes his own voice, detached and too deep, furious as his fist clenches in the cuff, guilty high throbbing in his throat. It’s not Astrid but it’s someone else and he’s sick with it.

“I’m in the business of making money,” Grisly chuckles, ripping duct tape off of clothes that don’t matter anymore, “subcontracting means my methods are up to my own discretion.” Grisly smiles as his knife bites through fabric and skin, spilling parts of someone across the floor, “dental is...not great.”

“I can see that.”

He can see everything. So much he never wanted to.

His dad wanted him to be a doctor, for a while, but he didn’t even try to lie about that one, not after his cat killed a bird and he threw up at the aftermath. He focuses on the substance of the conversation instead of the gore, falling back on what he does best.

“The developers employ me to clean up the streets and to make their buildings more desirable places to live, so that they can raise the rent.” Grisly’s hands are working, calm and sure of
themselves even as he prattles on, “and with tourism on the up and up, they can raise it even more. Shorter leases, higher cost, everyone wins.” He mimics the wounds in the Elizabeth Smith crime scene picture with detached efficiency.

“Not everyone.” Hiccup has always hated taxidermy. Something about presenting what used to be life in a way that glorified its murder is awful, but this is worse, entirely destroying the illusion that death leaves anything pristine.

“Aren’t you curious?” Grisly laughs, full of life, throbbing with the flow of someone else’s blood. “Don’t you wonder why I’m not surprised to see you?”

“You’re never very surprised to see me.” It’s a fact that could meld into realization if he could look away from blood seeping into the carpet. “How did you know to be here?”

Hiccup hates himself for being curious. For the first time, he absolutely, truly, profoundly hates the ever churning gears of his mind, fitting together things they shouldn’t and searching for gaps in the madness with intent to fill them. Was Grisly watching his apartment? Is he still? Or is this just the next notch in this string of luck so impossible that he can’t even call it luck anymore?

“I’ve been waiting for you, Hiccup,” Grisly says the name like he’s talking to an old friend and Hiccup swallows back another gag, “I knew it wouldn’t be long before you had to come see the scene of the carnage. It’s in your nature. I thought you’d bring Astrid with you, of course.”

“What are you talking about?” Hiccup doesn’t know which of his confusions is most pressing. His nature. Astrid. The fact that Grisly has been waiting here. They all swim in useless, buzzing circles around his mind and he chokes back something raw that’s either a sob or a desperate, miserable laugh.

“You know what?” Grisly slashes a vertical and then drops the body ceremoniously on the floor, approximately on top of the historical footprint of the eighteen-eighty-three doorway. “I’ve got time. Perhaps I moved too quickly, maybe if I’d waited, Astrid would have come looking for you and I wouldn’t have needed the substitute.”

Substitute. Astrid.

Grisly sees Hiccup move, reaching for his phone with frantic, shaking fingers, and he’s there instantly, wrenching Hiccup’s arm behind his back hard enough his elbow pops and prying the phone from his hand. Hiccup tries to kick him and stumbles, smearing the still open door. The geometric carpet in the hallway is splattered, adding to the dying arcade ambiance.

He gags again and Grisly lets go, walking around him to waggle a finger in his face like a stern schoolteacher.

“Don’t go ruining my crime scene now, I’d hate to have to fake a weak stomach.”

“Your crime scene,” Hiccup narrows his eyes, funneling shock into rage, “I saw you, you told me that…Astrid…”

“Let me lay this out for you, Hiccup,” he gives the name the teasing intonation it hasn’t had since high school, and the top hat on his head is even more surreal, “in a way you’ll understand.” His smile is alive, crawling and creeping across his cheeks like it’s devouring pale flesh, “you’ve always been the prime suspect for the Grimborn copycat murders.”

Hiccup’s heart pauses for a terrifying millisecond, the freefall giving him just enough quiet to think.
“You framed me.”

“Very good, Hiccup, I knew you wouldn’t break at the first sight of a fresh kill,” he claps, a macabre Willy Wonka who didn’t outgrow murder with the advent of security cameras.

Cameras.

There has to be evidence of this somewhere. His eyes flick to the curtains and his stomach twists at how well they’re shut. But on the street, somewhere, there has to be evidence. Over the last few bloody months, there has to be something.

If his alibi had been with him…

“You weren’t supposed to find the first body,” Grisly starts digging through Astrid’s kitchen cabinets, pulling out a jar of bleach wipes and holding them up triumphantly, “that video I gave to the police was supposed to place you there after the investigation was another useless, lazy victim deep.” He wipes the back of the chair, the rickety stool by the door.

“But Astrid…”

“Focus,” he grabs Hiccup’s chin with bruising fingers, “I’ll take care of her once you’re in custody. This is all a bit of a rush now, you can thank your idiot cousin for the change in schedule.” His lip curls, revealing a canine a little too sharp, “I’ll see if a syringe of air finishes what a bullet couldn’t.”

Hiccup bites his tongue against shouting, every muscle in his body fighting to stay upright as his head swims. Snotlout. Astrid. The hospital that felt like home for a second the scene of another flat lined monitor, blaring in tune with Hiccup’s incoherent thoughts.

“Why are you telling me all of this? I’ll just tell everyone the truth—”

“Who will listen to you?” Grisly is a cat with a mouse in his corner, holding it down by the tail and watching it squirm.

“I don’t know, a jury? Don’t you think it might introduce reasonable doubt for me to tell a detailed account of how you killed someone in front of me and told me that you were framing me for it?” Hiccup has never reacted appropriately to corners, he starts looking for windows before he checks if the door is locked, “if this goes to trial—"

“Trial? Ha!” Grisly shouts a laugh, “this won’t ever go to trial.”

“How—"

He cuts off the question with a sharp flick to Hiccup’s forehead, “the system is broken, it destroys those who refuse to exploit it.”

“Nice Bond villain line, but you won’t get away with this.” Hiccup hears his dad’s absolute confidence in his tone even as his heart is screaming at him to run and regroup, but he forces himself to maintain eye contact.

“Oh, but I already have,” Grisly grins, uncuffing the door and yanking Hiccup around to cuff his other hand. His shoulder sings in pain as Grisly pulls out a police radio and starts speaking into it with a horrible impression of an officer’s anxious, professional tone, “we have a 187 at 324 Harbor Rd. The suspect is in custody. Send an extra clean-up crew, there’s a lot of…evidence to be collected.”
Hey so this took forever but I have a good excuse, I legitimately broke my right pinky in 2 places (and hyperextended the distal joint when setting it) and I actually couldn't type for forever. I complained a lot on tumblr but just in case any of y'all didn't see it. Not that I have to explain I'm just...predisposed to guilt. So I thought I'd mention it...

Four thirty-seven in the morning is not time to wake up, but Astrid doesn’t have much of a choice after Hiccup’s side of his bed goes cold and the wheels in her mind start spinning, skating across the last twelve and twenty-four and thirty-six hours. Hiccup exhausted beyond sanity at the hospital, Hiccup sleeping with his head on her lap. Hiccup with damp hair and wide eyes, laying her back on his desk. Hiccup laughing at a joke that could only be funny in the first hours of the morning, sleepy hands holding her close.

“I don’t want it to be tomorrow,” he’d whispered in her ear, voice hoarse and comfortable as he pressed a tired kiss to her jaw, pulling her leg over his hip like if he just arranged their limbs carefully enough, they could feasibly meld into a single person. “Tomorrow’s just going to be more hospitals and decisions and not enough…” He trailed off, palm dragging up the curve of her waist.

“It already is tomorrow, technically,” she’d looked at the clock until he dragged her face back to his, soft thumb on her chin.

“Well sure, if you’re still a stickler for a linear definition of time,” he smiled, bringing her back to her apartment hallway where she couldn’t help but notice he was charming and handsome under the stupid hat. “But cyclically, it’s not really morning until we sleep, is it?”

“We already slept,” she reminded him, difficult just so that he’d narrow his eyes in a cute, shrewd way and kiss her. He went further than that, rolling her onto her back and holding the sheets dramatically above his head before disappearing under them, breath ticklish on her navel as his hands made room for himself between her knees.

“No more of that then,” he’d laughed, kissing her hip, “no sleeping, no tomorrow. It’s a deal.”

The only thing more shocking than how quickly Astrid trusted Hiccup is how quickly she got used to him. As electric as his presence has become, it’s comfortable too, a secondary North her internal compass passively tracks when he’s in range to keep herself in alignment.

She bites her lip and sighs, staring at the ceiling for a ten count before giving up and rolling out of bed.

His closet isn’t a walk-in, but it’s larger than hers, and she finds a soft sweatshirt that smells like him hanging at the back of it. She pulls it on and pauses to touch the cold side of the bed, taking in the silence, as temporary as it is. He was right, there’s a whole day of hospitals and adult arrangements ahead of her, but after how easy and good last night was, nothing seems insurmountable.
She brushes her teeth with her finger again, looking around the bathroom at the old bathmat and Hiccup’s shirt from yesterday balled up in a corner. There’s a trimmer on the counter and auburn stubble in the sink and she finally starts to come around to the idea that sometimes when things seem too good to be true, it might just be because they are that good.

Hiccup wasn’t exaggerating how empty the kitchen is, but she manages to find a glass in one of the old walnut cupboards and get some water. She didn’t have much of a chance to look around yesterday, given she had better things to acquaint herself with, but since Hiccup isn’t back yet she starts scoping out the living room.

It’s a bachelor pad, obviously, old comfortable furniture without a decorative pillow in sight, video game controllers on the end tables and an empty beer bottle next to the remote. The rug is soft though and there are thankfully no Patriots posters on the wall, only two framed diplomas by the front door, both from the Berk Police Department. One is three years old and says ‘Snotlout G. Jorgenson’ in crisp black ink on thick white paper and the other was folded at some point and is starting to yellow around the edges, the name ‘Stoick Haddock’ handwritten in careful cursive script.

The frame of the older diploma is dusty and Astrid tucks her hand back into Hiccup’s sweatshirt sleeve to clean it off, and as soon as she does, it reflects the heavy deadbolt on the old door behind her turning. If months of living at a bona fide murder site honed her reflexes, last night’s uneven sleep dulled them because she freezes, holding her breath and watching the reflection of the door slowly swing open.

A single footfall heavier than any Hiccup would be capable of producing crosses the threshold and her heart sinks as she turns to face whatever she’s being dragged into next.

“Can you take any longer to open a door?” Snotlout’s improbable voice cuts through the sudden silence and he stumbles into the living room.

“The plan was for me to sweep the place,” Eretson follows him, teeth clipping the consonants as frustration pours around the dulled corners.

“Sweep the place? It’s my apartment, what are you expecting to find?” Snotlout throws his arm up and looks around for evidence that Eretson’s concern is unnecessary, but his eyes land solidly on Astrid.

He raises an eyebrow and she jumps, coming back to life all at once and dropping her glass of water on the way to yank down the hem of Hiccup’s sweatshirt.

Eretson doesn’t flinch at the sound so much as he condenses, pulling his gun from the holster on his hip and cocking it with a cold steely click. Then he sees what, or who, he’s aiming at and his grip goes slack, barrel of the gun pointing towards the slowly spreading puddle on the floor as his jaw works soundlessly, eyes wide.

“Good morning,” Snotlout says, slow blooming grin spreading across his pasty, stubbled face as he takes in her bedhead. She almost wishes his eyes would dip lower because if he were being pointedly creepy, she’d have a reason to yell and maybe regain her grip on the situation, but instead she’s wedged under the weight of his obviously amused observation.

“Why aren’t you in the hospital?” The question comes out shrill and she jumps back from the water starting to pool between her toes. The sweatshirt is far too small for current company and she yanks it down again, fisting the fabric beside her thigh and holding it there. Eretson is still frozen, wrist slack and eyes wide and she snaps. “Never mind, I don’t care, can you put the gun away?”
“Apologies.” Eretson directs his startled gaze to the floor and stands up straight, thankfully re-holstering his weapon.

Well, thankfully until the lack of weaponry renders the situation impossibly more awkward.

And cold. Drafty even.

“And shut the door!” Astrid orders, even though she has no authority, and Eretson looks at Snotlout for corroboration.

“Just got shot,” Snotlout looks pointedly at his arm and Eretson sighs, bright red as he resigns himself to shutting and locking the door, clearly weighing the consequences of being on the other side and wishing his lot in life were different.

Something truly awful must lurk outside the door for Eretson to choose to be in this living room right now and Astrid wishes she knew what it was so that she could make her own educated decision.

“Good morning,” Snotlout repeats and Astrid glares, holding the fabric tight around her thighs.

“We already did that.” She steps sideways out of the puddle, daring either of the men in front of her to say something about her state of dress. For once in her life, it’s a fight she wishes she hadn’t picked because everything in Snotlout’s slight grin says ‘good game, Champ’.

“Where’s Hiccup?” Snotlout asks, looking around for another target to embarrass.

“He went to get breakfast.” Astrid does her best to frame the sentence as an insult but Snotlout is unfazed. No, unfazed would be better, he’s a delighted audience.

“That’s my boy.” He’s more than delighted, he’s disconcertingly, disruptively proud and Astrid wishes she could hitch a ride on Eretson’s shoulders as he attempts to sink into the floor.

Her clothes are in Hiccup’s office, where they were enthusiastically abandoned the night before, which she can’t think about with Hiccup’s nearly mortally wounded cousin grinning at her like a proud coach.

They aren’t even her clothes, they’re Tuffnut’s clothes.

She wishes she could ask Hiccup where he is, but of course, no phone. Eretson is so absolutely mortally embarrassed that she half thinks she could ask to borrow his phone to call Hiccup, but she doesn’t have his number memorized. Snotlout probably does, but asking him probably involves details requested in the name of ‘bro’.

“I’m going to go get dressed,” she announces, trying for something official and feeling like an inadequate cat herder.

It’s impossible to set her shoulders and stalk to Hiccup’s office while keeping her ass covered, but she tries anyway, eyes locked dead ahead to give her periphery a chance to reorient. Snotlout follows, lurking in the doorway as she confronts the mess on the office floor.

Or no, not mess. Her clothes and Hiccup’s towel.

Snotlout whistles under his breath.

“Damn, on the desk by all his special books?” He laughs, “that’s like nerdy hot, I’d give you a
wedgie if I thought you were wearing underwear.”

“Oh my god!” Astrid snaps, “if I didn’t think you’d bleed out, I’d—“

“Those are your clothes, from the hospital, does that mean Hiccup was in the towel?”

“Snotlout,” she hisses his name, “why the hell aren’t you in the hospital?”

“I’m proud of you two, really.” He nods, more encouraging coach than the creepy opportunist she knows how to deal with. She half expects him to clap her on the ass and tell her ‘good game’. “At the rate you were going, I thought you had another year of hand holding before anything happened. But then you fu—“

“Can you give me a minute?” She grits her teeth and he nods, hand held up in half surrender as he backs into the living room and shuts the door.

She takes a minute to breathe, leaning back against the desk and pressing her knuckles to her eyelids until she sees static.

“Where’s your mop?” Eretson asks, voice muffled through the door.

“What? My floor isn’t clean enough for you? Sorry, I was pretty busy being shot and almost dying, I should have mopped first though, I guess.”

“Just trying to make myself useful.”

She gets dressed with both eyes locked on the door, even though it seems like Snotlout is more likely to interrupt to congratulate her than to catch a glimpse of something he shouldn’t. She briefly thinks that she might not be cut out to be his ‘bro’ if this is the kind of involvement she can expect, but that’s not a train of thought she has time to catch right now, so she pushes it aside.

Last night felt like she and Hiccup were potentially the only two people in the world, or at least the only two that mattered. The only two she had to think about. But now it feels like the rest of humanity is butting its way back into her mind by way of one recently shot idiot and chasing any dregs of that peaceful feeling away.

When she opens the door, Snotlout is sitting on the couch, pouring over his phone. Eretson is lurking by the front door with one shoe on, obviously debating over taking the other off. Astrid’s shoes are next to the couch, vaguely under Snotlout’s legs, approximately where she abandoned them the day before as Hiccup left to shower.

She clears her throat and he doesn’t look up. Eretson doesn’t look away from his mismatched feet.

Snotlout doesn’t look good, that’s the obvious place to start. His face is nearly gray under patchy hospital stay stubble and the circles under his eyes look like bruises. She doesn’t know much about almost bleeding to death, but she’d assume a person should sleep more and move less afterwards and it looks like he’s been doing the exact opposite. He’s wearing sweatpants and a suit jacket that’s so oversized that its sleeve is cuffed above his wrist and his other arm is hidden inside of it, presumably in a sling or something to restrict him from ripping his stitches.

“What are you wearing?” She frowns, trying to place the jacket. It’s familiar somehow but she’s not used to it looking so absurd.

“When is it my turn to ask the questions?” He grumbles and she sighs.
“I don’t think I’m going to answer any of your questions,” she raises her eyebrows at his suit jacket, “and I didn’t realize harassing me required business casual.”

“Shit,” he looks down like he’s only now realizing his outfit might be out of the norm, “I fucking told you I was going to forget to give your fucking jacket back, this is not my fault.” He points a shaky, accusatory finger at Eretson who flushes over an absolutely stoic expression, rolling his sleeves up his forearms.

“You can keep it,” Eretson says, looking somehow larger and also more uncouth without his suit jacket as he decides to put his discarded shoe back on, apparently not planning on staying.

“Who said I want it? It’s itchy as hell,” Snotlout huffs, settling further into the couch and making no move to take the jacket off. “Oh, maybe I’ll need it when I have to sit on someone’s shoulders to pretend to be as freakishly tall as you are.”

“Or for when stripping doesn’t work out and you decide to become a flasher,” Astrid offers, folding Hiccup’s sweatshirt over her arm and pacing slowly, glancing at the door and wondering where Hiccup is. The handle of Eretson’s gun glints darkly and she pauses, turning her glare on him, “and why’d you point a gun at me? What could you possibly have been sweeping the place for, actually?”

“Grisly,” he says dumbly, a kid caught dually red handed next to a broken cookie jar.

“Why would Grisly be here?” She knows the broadest form of the answer even if the specifics are hazy.

Grisly would be here to do awful, nefarious things, and she swallows hard, waiting to be proven right.

“Because he shot Jorgenson.” Eretson squares his shoulders, bracing for an argument even as Astrid’s knees threaten to bobble.

She wishes she were shocked, then she could claim credibility instead of facing the fact that she half believed what Grisly was capable of just because Hiccup said it.

“He remembered?” She nods quietly to herself and Eretson relaxes, glad to not have to convince her.

“He is right here,” Snotlout grumbles, “and he didn’t have to because the idiot informed me that he came to the hospital to ‘finish me off’.” He rolls his eyes like he didn’t just tell her that someone connected with the police tried to kill him twice, “like he learned English from shitty mob movies or something. If Ruffnut hadn’t shown up when she did—”

“Oh my God,” Astrid cradles her head in her hands, staring at the floor and thinking of the day before, staring silent at a closed bathroom door and coaching Ruffnut through trying to do the right thing. If she’d stayed on the phone a second longer or if Ruffnut had turned around in the lobby like she’d threatened, Snotlout would be dead. Hiccup would hate her for making him leave the hospital.

Hiccup would be planning a funeral in his office instead of trying to get breakfast.

Hiccup.

“Where’s Grisly now?” She asks, dread creeping up her spine.
“Have you heard anything strange?” Eretson asks, back in detective mode, and Astrid shakes her head.

“No, but I can’t say I was listening for Grisly.”

“Yeah, you were too busy banging Hiccup on his desk.” Snotlout snorts, still not creepy. Still alive even though someone wanted the opposite. Thrilled to embarrass her, definitely, and so disconcertingly unconcerned with his own mortality that she feels coerced to protect him.

But Hiccup is out there alone, and if there’s even a chance he was right about Grisly, she doesn’t know how she’ll ever forgive herself for not going with him.

“Hiccup—he didn’t have any proof,” Astrid’s brain fills in ‘at the time’ as her eyes flick to the clock yet again. “But umm, he has a hunch that Grisly was connected to…what we talked about the other night. All of it, I mean.”

Eretson’s phone rings and Astrid jumps at the sound, wishing she’d been clearer or that she hadn’t talked at all. She won’t know which until he picks up and the way he’s looking at the caller ID makes her wary.

“This better be important.” He says, curt and responsible, and Astrid wants to snatch the phone away from him and put it on speaker. “A development? Explain to me how there can be a development on my case when I’m not working it.”

Astrid used to be the queen of ‘this better be important.’

For a while, in her teens, it seemed like a magic phrase. A filter that made people rethink before they added their petty issues to her already overfull plate. It felt like one of the only things she could say to make people hear her, to think twice about how many actually important things she must be dealing with to deny their request. And maybe it made her feel important too, to place herself in a position to rate other people’s problems on a scale she got to set.

Then she learned what it’s like when people rightfully push past it.

Important never means good. Important is never better.

“Who is it?” Snotlout asks, tensing on the couch until Astrid offers him a silent hand to help him up. He’s heavy in an amorphous, exhausted way that scares her, like all his weight has shifted to the wrong ends of his bones.

Eretson’s face falls under the weight of the importance he’s about to communicate, his eyes flicking between Astrid’s expression in limbo and Snotlout’s growing frustration, “when? No, take him to my office—it’s still my bloody case—that’s your job then, Johnson—Well, I’m on my way in now, I’ll be there in five minutes.”

He hangs up, exhaling one sharp breath and not so much puffing out his chest as making the most of the space he knows he takes up. It’s comforting, like a doctor trained to deliver bad news, and Astrid glares at him, willing him to spit out whatever it is so that she can shoulder her part of it.

People who hoard information inevitably drown in it and thinking of Hiccup’s books in the next room makes it hard to breathe.

“Is everything ok?” Astrid asks the general question, hoping against hope that it’ll keep the specific at bay. “Is Hiccup ok?” She tries the words on for size along with the lump of heavy concern in her chest that she can’t quite remember deciding to take on.
She did, of course, a long time ago.

It was there in the hospital when Hiccup looked at her for stability while his world spun out of control. It was there when he was too frazzled to function, when he needed to see the city for what it is and not what he wants it to be. It grew from a little seed of trust planted when she followed him into an alley, unsure of what she’d find but willing to take the risk.

Then, it didn’t feel like a risk at all.

“Grisly brought Hiccup down to the station on murder charges,” he says simply, and again, Astrid wishes she were surprised.

For months, she’s been reminding herself that if anything had gone differently, she could have ended up like that poor woman who trusted the wrong man in a dark alley, but because of Hiccup, that reality wasn’t ever really on the table for her. This one was.

“Murder charges.” It’s not a question, it’s another unfortunate sentence to try on, feeling out the edges of yet another situation happening to her without her input. “Who died?” Astrid asks because she doesn’t know what else to do. At this point, she doesn’t expect an answer, but the question was doing nothing useful overflowing inside her head.

It’s not doing anything useful in the open either. It flops on the floor like it’s dead itself and she starts planning for the worst, just in case.

“And all those morons just believe him?” Snotlout huffs, trying to inflate himself but leaking out of a painful, obvious hole.

“Says he caught him in the act.” Eretson looks like he’s lost many races training to win this one and the enemy is pulling ahead in the final sprint. “I’m heading in, it sounds like Grisly has my boss half-convinced to hand the case over to the NWF.”

“Those idiots couldn’t find the big bad wolf if he blew their house down or, I don’t know, shot another cop!” Snotlout gestures at his shoulder, “and yeah, I just called them pigs, indirectly, but I meant it.”

“Which is why I’m going to go deal with this,” Eretson crosses the room and almost gingerly helps Snotlout out of the suit jacket, sliding it back on like it’s bulletproof and he thinks he’s going to need it. Underneath, Snotlout is wearing a scrub shirt with a thankfully dry blotch of red-brown blood on the shoulder above a square of thick gauze taped to the wound. “Get that shoulder re-bandaged at least.”

“No! I’m just going to bleed out on the floor to spite you, specifically.” Snotlout does his best to take the sweatshirt Astrid’s holding but his face goes even paler when he yanks. “I’m coming with you.”

“Jorgenson,” Eretson’s tone would be patient if it were wrapping around any other word, but now it’s ill fitting, chafing at the seams.

“Hiccup didn’t kill anyone, you know he didn’t, I know he didn’t, and I don’t give a shit what that creepy fucker says—”

“He already tried to kill you once, don’t be stupid enough to give him another chance.”

“He already proved his aim sucks once, you mean,” Snotlout is giving up the fight though, clammy sweat blooming across his forehead as he leans back against the arm of the chair, catching his
breath. “Oh fuck off, you don’t have to be so smug about it.”

“You shouldn’t stay here,” Eretson checks his jacket pockets and pulls out a Ziploc bag with a handful of white pills in it and hands it to Snotlout who takes it, reluctantly grateful. “Either of you.”

“Oh we can’t stay here? You can’t kick me out of my own place, it doesn’t work like that,” Snotlout swallows one of the pills dry and winces as it sticks in his throat. It must be dry, like Astrid’s, like her automatic functions are on pause, waiting for permission to start working again. “And last time I checked, you still aren’t my commanding officer, so I’ll do whatever the fuck I want,” he says so that no one can say he didn’t.

“He can’t be anywhere on file,” Eretson tells Astrid, obviously done with the pointless argument, and she stands up straighter, glad for even the suggestion of something useful she can do. “Grisly might check there, especially now that he confessed his intentions, Snotlout is a liability.”

“I’ve always been a liability, thanks.” Snotlout rolls his eyes and Eretson’s jaw flexes at the comment. “Maybe we should go stay with Ruffnut, Grisly was scared of her for some reason.”

“No, the twins were suspects too, they gave information at the station,” Astrid thinks, tapping her finger on her chin and trying not to think about Hiccup’s developing penchant for touching her there. “Wait! I’ve got somewhere. Fishlegs didn’t give you his home address, did he?”

“No, would he have a record of any kind?”

“Absolutely not.” The first relief Astrid’s felt all day sweeps away just enough frantic anxiety to make room for dread, and Astrid doesn’t know any antidote for that but action. “Should I come to the station with you?”

“And leave me out?” Snotlout starts trying to stand up again but Eretson responds before he can put too much effort into it.

“You should stay out of it for now.”

“Isn’t it a little late for that?” The idea of backing off, of having less power in this already powerless situation, makes her want to scream. “He was with me last night, there’s no reason I couldn’t go down to the station and say so. I’ve been his alibi before, I am his alibi now. Someone has to listen that Grisly is behind this.”

“Last time you were his alibi, you ended up looking guilty by association,” Eretson reminds her.

“But—”

“And I got suspended and then shot,” Snotlout adds, forever helpful.

“Ok, but—”

“You need an alibi,” Eretson rubs his chin, “there’s no way Grisly won’t ask about you, you’ve been involved from the beginning.”

“She was with me,” Snotlout shrugs one shoulder, deflating a little against the chair, “no alibi like a cop alibi, right?”

“But I wasn’t.” Astrid is surprised to sound panicked, like even saying last night didn’t happen could take it from her somehow. Like lying could take the feeling that Hiccup’s apartment
inexplicably feels like home away. That hasn’t faded, if anything it’s stronger, like being surrounded by his space is keeping her sane through the latest insane moment.

“That’s not bad,” Eretson halfway compliments, checking for his gun one more time, “that gives you a reason to leave the hospital too.”

“But I wasn’t with you last night,” Astrid shakes her head, “especially as a ‘reason for you to leave the hospital’ four days after you were shot—"

“Yeah, you were,” Snotlout starts texting someone, “it was super hot, I’ll tell people it was hot.”

“No, you won’t.” She tries to take his phone and he winces when he tries to hold it out of her reach.

“Too late,” he grins, “already told Ruffnut.”

“She won’t believe you!”

“She doesn’t have to, she just has to lie, and she’ll know that since she helped me sign out of the hospital.” He looks seriously at her, “the last thing Hiccup needs is you looking like an accomplice again and linking whatever Grisly says he caught him doing back to three other murders.”

“Never thought I’d say this,” Eretson clears his throat and looks purposefully at Snotlout, “but you’re right. Get somewhere safe, I’ll call when I can.”

“Ok, but before you go can you tell me I’m right again?” Snotlout asks as Eretson opens the door, “and maybe add in that I’m tall and muscular, because flattery is the best medicine.”

“You mean laughter,” Eretson deadpans, expression chiseled in stone as he shuts the door and leaves them in silence.

Astrid steps forward and locks it, trying to weigh whether she feels overwhelmed or entirely disconnected from everything that just happened. Maybe it’s both and that’s worse, and she lets out a breath that feels shaky but sounds slow.

“I’ll be right back,” Snotlout announces before disappearing to the bathroom, the sink turning on as soon as he shuts the door.

She lets herself think, for a second, what the morning would have been like if Hiccup hadn’t left. No less awkward with Eretson showing up here, of course. Then again, Eretson didn’t see Hiccup at the hospital, chances are seeing Snotlout out of it would have reactivated his Mother Hen Protocol and he would have been out of bed fussing, nudity be damned.

Snotlout would probably be furious at Hiccup acting like the wrong ratio of “sexy” and “nurse” while he wanted to be invasively congratulatory. Eretson might have actually combusted from awkwardness.

Grisly wouldn’t have been able to frame him. Or Grisly would have come here next, after wherever he found Hiccup. There’s too many variables missing, the tight setup she familiarized herself with in Eretson’s office sprouting roots and propagating itself into any number of possible outcomes.

The sink is still running in the bathroom and she can hear Snotlout splashing occasionally so she decides that the chances of him bleeding out in there are low, at least until she hears him hit the floor. The utter helplessness of being without her phone or the ability to search for anything on the internet gets the best of her and she grabs the remote off of the coffee table, turning on the TV and fiddling with inputs until she finds cable. Patriots re-runs, of course, and she mutes it before
Snotlout can come out and decide it’s time for another of their great bonding marathons.

Like last night, apparently, which she can’t think about without thinking about Hiccup. Hiccup warm and safe, no part of him too far away for her to touch, their bedhead tangled together.

No, that won’t help anything. Getting somewhere safe might help Snotlout, but she doesn’t have Fishlegs’s number memorized or any way to call him. He must be working this morning though, since she isn’t.

If a few missed shifts get between her and safe harbor, she doesn’t know what she’ll do.

She’s looking for the news when she comes across a local channel, pausing when she recognizes Heather in an interview close up on a repeat of some Sunday night in-depth expose on the Grimborn murders.

“…course there’s something really compelling about looking at history through a modern lens, and I’m glad to see this unfortunate string of events connect people to the city’s past,” she says pleasantly while the camera pans up to show the Ripped Tavern’s pre-renovation grimy walls and a rack of Grimborn tee-shirts.

“I understand that the Berk PD has hired you as a Grimborn Expert to consult on the ongoing case?” A reporter that Astrid vaguely recognizes asks and Heather can’t seem to help but look a little smug.

Astrid’s thumb hovers over the channel button, her jaw twitching when she thinks about how happy Hiccup is to teach and learn and how imperious he isn’t, and she’s glad enough to have a distraction deflecting worry for frustration that she doesn’t change it.

“…really discuss that, given that the case is ongoing,” Heather continues with an almost flirtatious grin, like she’s getting a real kick out of keeping secrets only because she knows she’ll get to reveal them later. “but I think at this point in the investigation, the connection is inevitable. Obviously, whoever is committing these murders has not only a big Grimborn knowledge base but also a personal connection that they find motivating, for some reason.”

She thinks of Hiccup, motivated by seeing the city as something capable of surviving trauma and her stomach turns with the contrast to where he is right now.

“Given advances in modern forensics and the assumption that this ongoing string of murders will be solved, what do you think the chances are that it will provide insight into the original Grimborn murders?”

“The chances?” Heather snorts, “I can’t say anything about the chances, but whoever’s doing this really knows their stuff. I’m half tempted to visit their eventual cell and run a few of my pet theories by them.”

The bathroom door opens and Snotlout steps out, a fresh square of white gauze taped to his shoulder as he dries his face with the scrub shirt, pausing on the way to his closed bedroom door to frown at the TV, “Heather?”

“She’s talking about being hired to help with the case.”

“You can’t watch something normal for five minutes while I get change?” He mumbles on the way into his room, struggling with the knob for a second before getting it open and disappearing inside. “Nerd.”
“...paper recently mentioned the Admiral Haddock theory, do you think there’s any present connection to the Haddocks?”

Astrid didn’t know there was more than one. She didn’t know it was a family with a legacy aside from Hiccup and the freshly dusted diploma on the wall. It’s another link of the chain that Hiccup is somehow in the middle of as the noose tightens and she swallows hard, trying to focus on Heather’s words.

If a news channel is showing this as a rerun, that means there can’t be any news.

Except there’s so much that can’t be reported yet, and it’s not the first time recently she’s wished she knew less about the system that has her lying about whereabouts she’d never take back. She wishes she weren’t confronted with this reality, where Hiccup is in trouble and she has to contemplate what her life would look like without him in it.

“That theory is a joke,” Heather’s laugh is a little sharper, willing to lash out at the idea of feeling unheard, “it was the...the flat earth conspiracy of the day.”

“Can you explain what you mean by that?”

“It was...sensationalist and sensationalist on purpose, there’s no way that the Admiral could have had anything to gain from the murders.”

“So, you think whoever is committing the murders now has something to gain from it?” The reporter asks with a little too much interest and Heather is obviously reminded of something by an ear piece she’s not good at hiding.

“I really can’t discuss the current case.”

“Well, the bleeding stopped at some point,” Snotlout comes back out of his bedroom in a baggy black tee shirt that’s stretched at the neck like he struggled getting into it. The color makes him look paler and she almost advises him to change, but if Fishlegs is mad at her for missing work, a little pity might be on their side.

She thinks about asking Snotlout to use his phone to call a cab, like it’s nineteen ninety eight and people get their information from the news, but there are enough holes in this plan already that it shouldn’t matter if they get an Uber to the archives. The driver looks at Snotlout like Astrid is trying to use the first dregs of a zombie apocalypse to her advantage and she attempts to distract them with small talk, wondering how Ruffnut gets drivers to wait outside with a shovel.

It has been the longest few months of her life, and every city block dilates further. It feels like it takes hours to locate the service elevator down to the archives, but all of the lost time recondenses when she’s standing in front of Fishlegs’s desk, a half-dead Snotlout leaning on her shoulder and no miraculous news from Eretson propping her up.

She clears her throat, trying to remember if she’s ever missed a shift of another job and of course, coming up dry, “Hey, Fish.”

“Astrid?” He looks up, taking his one headphone out and jumping to his feet, “where have you been? I must have sent a hundred texts—”

“Sorry, I don’t have my phone, I know I missed...I don’t know how many shifts I missed but that’s not like me, I promise it’s not.”
“Seems like you’ve been doing a lot that’s ‘not like you’ since you started here.” Fishlegs crosses his arms just long enough for Astrid to freeze up. He looks mad, sure, but worried too and she holds out a placating hand.

“I can explain.”

“No, sorry,” he deflates, patting her shoulder apologetically and seemingly noticing Snotlout for the first time, eyes widening. “I was just so worried, with hearing how it went with the detective and knowing that I told him about Hiccup and the copier and—”

“It’s ok,” she cuts him off, shifting from foot to foot and debating whether she should offer Snotlout a chair or not. If she does, she’s half worried he won’t get back to his feet again, and he’s heavier than he looks, even after the blood loss. “I should explain, before I ask this favor, actually.”

“No, you don’t need to explain,” Snotlout insists, holding out his hand. His left hand, because his right is hanging lame at his side, “Snotlout.”

“Fishlegs.” He frowns at Astrid, “is it drugs?”

“See? He won’t help you if you explain. Do you want some?” Snotlout takes the bag out of his sweatpants pocket and holds it up. “Because if that’s what it takes—”

“Put those away,” Astrid hisses, helping Snotlout sit down in her office chair, “it’s not drugs, it’s—well, he has drugs because he just got shot, but—well, I need your help.”

“Back up, he just got shot?” Fishlegs sits on the edge of his desk, “who is he, again?”

“I just told you, I’m Snotlout.”

“That means nothing to me.”

“He’s a cop,” Astrid tries and Snotlout shushes her.

“Don’t lead with that, a lot of people don’t like cops—”

“We think Hiccup’s getting framed for murder, and we need to lay low, is your spare room still available?” She asks simply and Fishlegs narrows his eyes in his standard ‘more information required’ thinking face.

She tells him everything. Snotlout interjects with details she didn’t know, some of them he must have learned last night when he was evidently helping Eretson with the case. Fishlegs doesn’t ask much, and by the time she gets to this morning, her voice catching over describing how they learned that Grisly has Hiccup at the station for questioning, his frown is set in to the point that she worries she misjudged.

She was forced to trust Snotlout and Eretson and even Hiccup, in a way, if she didn’t want to go through all the hassle of making a formal harassment complaint. From the beginning, she chose to trust Fishlegs and if he throws that back on her now, she’s worried it would snap something tenuous deep inside her. An instinct that could be strong if it just has time to grow.

“Let me summarize. Instead of just taking me up on my offer to stay in my spare room before your apartment became the newest target of a Grimborn copycat serial killer,” Fishlegs pauses to swallow, “who you think is in league with the police, you got even more entrenched in the mystery, and now you’re asking me to essentially harbor two possible fugitives, one of whom was shot four days ago and might still have the well-connected murderer after him.”
Astrid squares her shoulders, “Yes. Please.” One please is just polite, but two is begging and she pauses, hoping she won’t have to and hating that she would.

“I’ll do it,” he nods, “I was just making sure I’m not biting off more than I can chew.”

“You must have a gigantic mouth, dude—”

“Thank you,” Astrid throws her arms around Fishlegs shoulders, effectively cutting Snotlout’s surely very complimentary statement off. “Seriously, thank you.”

“Hey, you’re welcome, no one would come up with a lie that elaborate for missing two shifts,” he pats her shoulder and she sighs, finally able to take an actual deep breath now that someone is sharing at least some of the weight on her shoulders.

“You haven’t met Hiccup,” Snotlout snickers and Fishlegs looks like he’s going to join in on the joke until he catches Astrid’s fallen expression and stops himself.

“I think I need a drink if I’m going to do this,” Fishlegs looks around at the stacks, the dust layers on the books separating stories that ended when they ended and those still growing with everyone who still picks them up. “I’ve never harbored fugitives before, but I think I can justify closing the archives for a day to learn the ropes.”

“That…sounds like the best plan I haven’t pulled out of my ass today,” Astrid laughs but gestures to the clock on the wall, “it is seven in the morning though.”

“Oh!” Snotlout perks up slightly, “I bet I know a place within our budget that’s probably open.”
The ride to the station in the back of Grisly’s unmarked car is a blur that smells like the heavy stink of Hiccup’s anxiety, blood, and the new car scented air freshener hanging from the rear view mirror. Grisly hums continuously, a tune that elevator designers would find too festive, and Hiccup can’t decide whether he’s better off thinking or not thinking, not that he seems to have a choice aside from staring wide eyed at the back of the passenger seat, arm throbbing from being wrenched behind his back.

He stumbles when Grisly half shoves him in front of a wall striped in foot wide increments, nearly smacking his forehead on a crisp number 6 before regaining his balance. Grisly produces a plastic board displaying a six-digit booking number and Hiccup’s name in block letters, the roman numeral ‘III’ included at the end like this is some kind of cosmic déjà vu, before handing it over and stepping behind the ancient mugshot camera.

Hiccup’s dad was arguing about funds to get that camera replaced when he died, and his presence haunts the room like a poltergeist too disappointed to step in as Hiccup’s savior.

“Say Guilty,” Grisly teases, canines sharp and somehow bright even though he’s standing outside the circle of garish light from the halogen lamp dangling above Hiccup’s head. “My boy, at least try not to look so stunned, I will be bringing Astrid a keepsake when I see her next. Not that she’ll be keeping anything for long.”

Astrid.

Her name snaps him out of his daze and his heart thuds back to life, slamming so hard in his chest he’s worried about it making him throw up what he kept in at her apartment. Grisly’s going to go after her, he has to stop him. There has to be a way to stop him, and Hiccup drops his booking number, reflexively struggling against the handcuffs.

“Now, Hiccup, this still has to look good in the system.” Grisly shoves the board back in his hands and he elbows the wall hard enough that it sparks up his arm, like the time he got caught trying to twist out of his dad’s stolen handcuffs and had to talk fast. “Some of that stubbornness you’re so famous for. Show me how brittle that strong chin is.”

Grisly taps his own chin and Hiccup grinds his teeth, standing up straight and holding the board at a coquettish angle in front of his chest.

“Be sure to get my good side.” Hiccup is in the system. He’s stuck here as long as it takes to process him, and as long as he’s not in a cell, as long as he can see Grisly, Grisly can’t get at Astrid. She is safe as long as Grisly is with him.

Ask a few hundred Trip Advisor reviews averaging a solid four point two, he can fill dead space and captivate an audience.

“Right profile then,” Grisly indicates that he turn and he sighs, anything to keep sound coming out because if it stops, the paralysis might set back in.

“Wait,” he says as the camera flashes, heartbeat too fast and off kilter, like a hummingbird in a slowly tipping cage, “All Right, in the creepy comic sans note that you obviously wrote—”

“I thought it sounded like you,” Grisly steps into the light, only serving to wash the last ghost of color out of his cheeks, “blathering on like you do, saying nothing of substance.”
“Comic sans?” Hiccup snorts, breathing deep and leaning into his longest, best known role.

His dad used to say that he talked like his life depended on it, but Hiccup never anticipated the real test would be other people’s lives. People he loves.

“It’s easier to read.”

“Choosing Comic sans might be the worst thing you’ve done.” He watches Grisly’s narrow nostrils flare, the first crack in his manic veneer, and the little lively Snotlout in the back of Hiccup’s mind brags that antagonizing Grisly was the right thing to do all along.

It got real Snotlout shot, of course, but for Grisly to take the same tactic now he’d have to get Hiccup away from the cameras, which he can’t easily do mid-arrest.

Grisly starts patting Hiccup down by the desk in the intake room, thin, dry lips quirking when he touches the dried blood at the neck of Hiccup’s shirt and Hiccup turns his gag into a laugh.

“Are you dyslexic? I thought that was a myth.”

Grisly pats his front pocket before shoving his hand deep enough inside that parts of Hiccup retreat as far as they’re able.

“Do you want to hear that I was bullied? That I was small and slow in school and that made me cruel? Does it make your situation easier to deal with if you pity me?” His grin spreads slowly across his face, the only part of him that seems alive, and his fingers curl in Hiccup’s pocket.

“What happened at Astrid’s apartment might be your thing,” Hiccup makes eye contact with the outdated, image only security camera in the corner and takes a deep breath before glaring down at Grisly, “but it’s not mine.”

“I’m doing this because I want to. Because it’s fun to make you and your friends and the police run around like scared chickens in their coop while the fox locks himself in with them.” He stands up, pulling a ring of keys out of Hiccup’s pocket with a self-satisfied chuckle. The keyring reads ‘Benson’ and Hiccup’s blood runs cold. “And as much as you frustrated me, all of it makes catching you so much better.”

“Well Mr. Benson definitely has enough money to sue me for identity theft,” Hiccup clears his throat, “so that’s not…great.”

“This is…brilliant,” Grisly’s breath smells like death. Not rot. Not the cloying, tired scent of road kill in the sun. The moment of death itself, when the electric impulses that used to be human evaporate into the air in a cloud of static and pain. Like he breathes that in and lets it seep slowly through him, preserving him in its singular, inevitable eternity. “That idiot woman is still looking for these, I can’t wait to tell her I found them in evidence.”

“Ruffnut got a fax from the condos,” Hiccup whispers to himself, and Grisly’s eyes sharpen, grin deflecting to grimace.

“I thought you were smarter than this.” Grisly steps away, rooting through a locker for a jumpsuit and shoving it at Hiccup, who drops it. “Your clothes are evidence. You can change behind the curtain.” He points at a small corner of the room separated from the rest by a shower curtain and Hiccup holds his hands up to be uncuffed.

Hiccup takes his time changing, pausing with his shirt off to scrub as much of the dried blood from his neck and jaw as he can, trying not to inhale. He waits for Grisly to make a run for it, to go after
Astrid and Snotlout and leave him in the hands of another officer, but he just paces the room, his footfalls padded like a predator on the cusp of making prey aware of their presence.

The floors creak though, cheap rubber-backed rug squeaking against peeling linoleum, the decay of the room protecting Hiccup like history always seems to.

The jumpsuit and the underwear issued along with it are too big, threatening to fall down as he adjusts the orange cuff around his metallic left ankle. Grisly must see what he’s doing because he comments, voice smooth enough to highlight how rough it was before the pause.

“Usually I’d take something that could so easily be used as a bludgeon,” he sneers when Hiccup pulls the curtain back, “but in your hands…”

“If I’m so scrawny, why me?” Hiccup doesn’t pick up his own clothes, instead waiting as patiently as he can feign for Grisly to re-cuff him, far too tight this time, and add the pile of fabric to his evidence bag.

“It doesn’t take bodily strength to wield a knife,” Grisly points at his temple, “only strength of mind.”

“So that’s why you chose to frame me?”

“What does it matter? It’s done.” He checks his watch, which is impossibly immaculate given what the shiny band spent the morning reflecting. “Or almost done. It will be soon.”

“Then what’s the harm in telling me why you chose me?”

“I never had children—”

“Thank God,” Hiccup rolls his eyes and Grisly tries to ignore him, jaw twitching. He’s not a man used to being antagonized and the cracks are spreading.

Snotlout is smart, Astrid is brilliant, if Grisly is loud. If he’s off kilter, maybe they’ll react quickly enough. Maybe it’s about knocking him off his game while he’s still flying high from his morning indiscretions.

“Clingy, slimy little vermin—”

“Right, kids are slimy, not blood or—”

“But I was under the assumption that at some point they stop with the incessant questions.” Grisly’s voice trembles as his volume expands and Hiccup shrugs, forcing the motion flippant.

“I didn’t.” He exhales, “what came first, the Admiral Hiccup Haddock collection or you choosing me as your prime suspect?” He can’t help but be curious and given everything else going on, he hates himself for it. Or at least he tries to, maybe some hate manages to wedge itself in his brain next to everything else.

“Like I said Mr. Haddock,” Grisly doesn’t like repeating himself but seems compelled to tie off loose ends, “I’m in the business of making money, you and your tour are not.”

“But Heather…” Hiccup can’t help but laugh, a real shocked laugh that makes him worry that part of his brain is floating away with the controls and his confident ruse, “are you saying you framed me for murder because Heather is more marketable than me?”
Grisly doesn’t like being laughed at and his expression darkens, like he’s burning through his morning’s effervescence faster than he’s used to, and Hiccup wonders how long the camera will really protect him.

Not that it matters. Snotlout matters. Astrid matters. It’d kill him if he didn’t get to tell her how he feels, but in the context of this situation, that’s kind of a moot point, isn’t it?

“When I told you not to pity me, I meant it,” Grisly growls, rough as his grip on Hiccup’s arm. A purposeful, strangling grip that’s too practiced to make an empty threat. A grip that promises. “I crawled from under the weight of everything that made me pitiable. Born in a country that had no use for me? I made myself indispensable. I took the chances others would not, I made the choices that coddled, weak people could not, and I took control. I didn’t beg in the streets like a dog, I caught the dog, ignored its squeal and made the streets better.” He hisses, a fine mist spraying across Hiccup’s face as Grisly leans in, practically primed to bite, “I take control.”

“Dead people don’t really have a say though, so is it really control?” Hiccup’s voice doesn’t shake even as his knees do.

“Yes,” Grisly checks his phone with the hand not cutting off circulation to the part of Hiccup’s arm not already deadened by cuffs, the bright screen illuminating his face at an angle that questions the humanity of his features. The sharp jaw, the thin lips, the hollows of his cheeks still shadowed like every kill he makes drags him halfway down after the victim, “the judge is ready to see me about your bail.”

“So I wait in a holding cell,” Hiccup’s throat tightens at the thought of letting Grisly out of his sight. At different blonde hair in his hand, blood soaking a different floor.

“No,” the superficial cracks on Grisly’s veneer spread outward along his geometric edges and for the first time, Hiccup sees something like hesitance mirrored in his usually blank eyes, “he wants to see you too.”

“What’s to stop me from telling him all of this?” Things aren’t going according to Grisly’s plan, for maybe the first time since Hiccup stumbled across a body he wasn’t supposed to yet, and he dives in this time with his eyes wide open. “Maybe it doesn’t need to get to trial—”

“Go ahead,” Grisly’s smirk is cruel now instead of indifferent, like the lock is broken off of the predator’s cage and he doesn’t care that the zookeeper has a gun, “if you want to assume I’m the only one capable of cleaning up the rest of this mess.”

He’s not working alone. There must be NWF members willing to step in and Hiccup thinks of Snotlout, vulnerable in a hospital bed. Astrid, vulnerable in his apartment, finally soft after fighting it for so long. After twenty-five long years, Hiccup finally has motivation to be quiet.

He must nod and something in his numbed expression must look like understanding because Grisly practically drags him out of the door and down the hall to a small office sometimes used for legal rituals when the county courthouse is full. No one has to tell Hiccup to sit on the small plastic chair inside. He isn’t surprised when the door locks behind them.

He is, however, surprised to see the judge.

“Honorable Judge Treacherous,” Grisly tilts the title into something pedantic as he takes the floor, pacing back and forth with steps as even as the heartbeat Hiccup saw him stop couldn’t have been. “I understand you wanted to see the suspect in person to set bail, an unorthodox decision for a man in your…lofty position—“
“Captain Stoick Haddock was an old friend of mine,” Judge Treacherous leans his elbows on the desk and looks at Hiccup over his glasses, down his repeatedly broken nose. Hiccup knows his dad can take posthumous credit for at least two of those breaks and he swallows hard, fidgeting in the too tight cuffs on his wrists.

The jumpsuit makes him feel guilty, but not as guilty as his bloody clothes would have.

“Friend?” Hiccup asks, over-used voice croaking around the question until he clears his throat. “I didn’t quite get that impression.”

Judge Treacherous laughs, “I didn’t get the impression dear Stoick was raising a serial killer.”

“Me either,” Hiccup blurs, fingers numb with instant regret.

“Is that a confession?” Grisly’s eyes sparkle, somehow reflecting blood no longer in front of him.

“This isn’t a trial, Mister…Gruesome, was it?” Judge Treacherous curls his lip and Grisly stands up straighter, rigid like a scarecrow itching for dawn. “When will the officer…Ah, here, Detective Eretson,” Treacherous skims through a stack of papers in front of him, “when will I be meeting this Detective Eretson?”

“Well, as I’m sure you can see from the entire case history I’ve presented to you, Eretson has proven ineffective—“

“Sorry I’m late,” Eretson’s accent cuts through the creak of the poorly hung door as he walks inside, smoothing his suit jacket and standing shoulder to shoulder with Grisly, “train ran slow.”

Hiccup never though Eretson’s presence could be comforting, but the way he glares at Grisly seeks to change that. Grisly’s suddenly tense shoulders back the notion up as he turns around, blood leaching from his face like it leached into Astrid’s carpet.

Astrid.

Panic grips his heart like a steel vice and he repeats the mantra of his morning to himself. Hiccup is in the system, he’s not going anywhere, and as long as he can see Grisly, Grisly can’t get at Astrid. She’s safe as long as Grisly is with him.

Eretson must see his panic, because he catches Hiccup’s eye and nods, his expression as unreadable as always and maybe Hiccup is lying to himself but there’s something comforting there. Something solid. And while Hiccup knows that the detective’s solidity isn’t necessarily rooted in his favor, it’s clearly planted against Grisly and that has to be good enough for now.

“Good old Berk public transportation,” Judge Treacherous attempts small talk, skimming through the file in front of him, “I thought you’d called me here for an offense you caught Mr. Haddock committing this morning.”

“Yes—”

“Where is that information in the case file?” Treacherous slides the manila folder towards Grisly, who bristles.

“I haven’t had a chance to include it,” his voice is mellow even as the hands folded behind his back twitch. “but the rest of the file is—”

“Very thorough,” Eretson cuts in, “it’s been my case for months—”
“And yet I’m the one lucky enough to stumble on the answer,” Grisly grins too bright, his façade slipping another inch under Eretson’s even stare.

“Stumble, right,” Eretson raises an eyebrow, “lucky.”

“Mr. Ghastly, I have to say I’m a bit confused to be summoned so early in the morning to set bail for a case I’ve been seeing discussed on the news for months.” Treacherous folds his hands, “if you honestly believe Stoick’s boy is the Grimborn Copycat killer, I couldn’t in good conscience let him back on the streets.”

If Grisly was pale before, he’s chalky now, complexion abandoning its noble cause to cling to the last dregs of life as his expression freezes into place like a wax effigy stretched over limestone.

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that if there’s even a chance that Mr. Haddock is connected to everything in this file, I’ll be making the decision to hold him without bail until a trial can shed proper light on the situation.”

“If there’s a chance—shed light—” Grisly sputters, “more than enough light has been shed, I saw him with my own two eyes, holding a girl up and slitting her throat—”

“I’ll need details for the report,” Eretson cuts in, voice level, and if Hiccup weren’t sworn to silence, he might laugh. Or cry. Or hug Eretson’s leg like the child Grisly accused him of being and hide.

“And I have those details,” Grisly struggles for his composure, a predator walking on wet tile for the first time, a janitorial bureaucracy rendering millions of years of evolution useless, “but to issue a remand without bail—to put this boy’s disrespect of the law on our taxpayers—”

“Taxpayers who pay taxes for the legal system to keep them safe from alleged serial murderers,” Treacherous would bang a gavel if he had one, but he doesn’t so he thumps a meaty hand on the desk. “Now if you’ll excuse me—”

“You haven’t even read the file! And you call yourself a judge,” Grisly’s voice cracks like his composure did as he flicks through the file, dropping half the pages on the floor, “the assailant worked backwards through the Grimborn murders, I caught him in the act of the first this morning. It stands to reason that he’s done with his spree—”

“You’re assuming someone reasonable doing the reasoning,” Treacherous looks to Eretson and then to Hiccup, his tone almost apologetic as he digs in his heels. “Letting a proposed serial murderer out on bail would be the end of my career.”

“House arrest then,” Grisly tries, “he lives with a cop, it’s perfect, there’s no sense in using the city’s resources to hold him at an overpriced jail.”

“Overpriced?” Treacherous snorts, “I picked out the bathroom tile myself, it was very reasonable.”

“Also, your Honor, the officer that lives with Mr. Haddock is currently suspended and on medical leave,” Eretson adds and Treacherous laughs before signing a piece of paper, presumably with his official recommendation.

“Held without bail until the trial,” he sets his pen down, “if the boy has already killed four people, I don’t trust an injured, suspended cop to keep him contained if he decides to work backwards through Bundy.”
“Look at the file!” Grisly shouts, the predator’s paw caught in a trap as he fought to remove a thorn, “it’s immaculate, from his research to the timing of the murders. Everything points to him! Every last drop of blood—”

“Mr. Garish, that is enough!” Treacherous stands up, towering even over Eretson, Hiccup’s dad’s ghost finally stepping into a pair of familiar if un-ideal shoes.

“It’s Grisly, your Onerous.”

The silence rings like high pitched static, the fire alarm between beeps.

Eretson clears his throat, “On second thought, maybe this case is better suited to Mr. Grisly’s particular talents.”

Hiccup’s stomach falls out from under him, and he looks around for confirmation that his ears aren’t making up worst case scenarios, like his actual situation isn’t bad enough. Eretson is patient in professional silence but Grisly’s face is contorting in confusion and rage as Judge Treacherous raises a doubtful eyebrow.

Grisly talks first, voice small, “You do?”

“Seeing how this is going, your Honor, I agree with Mr. Grisly, I might have been over my head with the unique complexities of the case.” Eretson gives Hiccup the barest ghost of a nod as he defers to Grisly with a subtle duck of the chin that’s anything but reverent.

“Well, finally someone is seeing sense,” Grisly attempts to regain his quiet, stealthy tone but instead his voice wavers, something uncouth bleeding into the edges.

“You can see my commanding officer about the transfer paperwork,” Eretson points vaguely down the hallway then turns back to Treacherous, “Captain Anderson, I know you two have worked together in the past.”

“I don’t know if I’d say ‘together’ quite so loud, Detective,” Treacherous chuckles, “that was off the books.”

“Apologies.”

“And if that is your decision, Eretson, I’m afraid you’ll have to leave the courtroom.” Treacherous looks between him and Grisly, reacquainting himself with the changing situation.

“I think it’s what’s best moving forward.” Eretson nods, looking every shade as competent and a hundred times more mysterious than Hiccup has ever seen him.

“Once the transfer paperwork is complete and the file is updated,” Treacherous slides what’s left in the folder pointedly at Grisly, who trips over his own feet to bend and pick up the mess on the floor, looking more like the Ms. Moore, the condo manager, than Hiccup ever could have imagined, “then we can move forward discussing any warrants your investigation might need. Anything else?”

“No.” Grisly clutches the disorganized file to his chest like someone just used it to bludgeon him and he’s still recovering from the shock.

As soon as the door closes behind him, Eretson clears his throat again, approaching the desk with a natural sort of ease, “I was wondering if Grisly selected a public defender.”
“No, he did not, as he completely violated protocol.” Judge Treacherous laughs again and Eretson’s smile is slow and reserved, but unmistakable.

“I’d like to offer to represent Mr. Haddock moving forward.” Eretson presents the solution like it’s not impossible and Hiccup and Treacherous trade confusion glances. “Is that a problem?”

Treacherous starts slowly, “Are you…”

“I’ve passed the bar, yes, I’ll have my paperwork faxed over.”

“Obviously,” Treacherous nods to himself.

“I’ll be taking the back interrogation room to speak to my client then, I’ll address having him moved to the county jail when we’re through.”

Grisly wants to kill Astrid and Snotlout, Grisly is on the case now. Grisly framed Hiccup. Eretson turned over the case to him, even though Eretson has never shown anything like trust in the man. Eretson has gone from savior to traitor to…lawyer in the most confusing five minute span of Hiccup’s life, and that’s saying a lot for someone who is currently being framed for a slew of violent murders.

Eretson sits down across the table in the interrogation room and starts babbling in legal-ese, the words going into Hiccup’s ears like the strumming of an out of tune base guitar until he opens his mouth, unsure what’s going to fall out until it does.

“You’re a lawyer?”

Eretson pauses, eyebrow raised, ghost of a grin haunting the corner of his mouth, “That’s what you’re asking? You should be asking my rate.”

“What’s your rate?” Hiccup parrots back at him and Eretson folds his hands on the table.

“You help me bring Grisly down,” he starts, deadly in a way that makes Hiccup want to hide behind him again. “And whatever you can get Jorgenson to throw in. Now, let’s start with what actually happened this morning.”

“Ok, ok…let me think,” he tries to pull back the veil of blood separating then from now and blushes when he succeeds, “so I was with Astrid—”

“I know,” Eretson surprises him by blushing himself, the pink in his cheeks exactly at odds with the rest of his appearance, “after that. Let’s start when you left the apartment.”

“Oh. Right.” He rubs the back of his neck, “wait, you know? How do you know?”

“I was—in the interest of full disclosure regarding the case,” Eretson clears his throat, tone more formal as his face reddens, “at your residence along with Jorgenson this morning—”

“Snotlout?” Hiccup frowns, “is he ok? Is Astrid ok? I have to—Grisly’s going to go after them—”

“They’re somewhere safe,” Eretson nods, all business again, “now back to the beginning, tell me what happened when you left the apartment.”

The county jail stands on the corner where Big Top 24/7 Video used to, in direct sight of the back of the police station. Hiccup can see his dad’s office’s window from the tiny, barred window of his
cell and he remembers being nine years old visiting his dad at work and wondering why his dad couldn’t make time to take him to the circus.

After the rumors that the pollution in Berk’s shipping lanes was deforming whales were scientifically corroborated in the mid-nineteen-seventies, trucking took over. Of course, trucking companies were worried about carjacking in the largely impoverished downtown Berk, so a beltway smeared a swath of unpopulated buildings into a slick semi-circle of asphalt. And with all freeways come truck stops and motels with flickering Vacancy signs, and Big Top 24/7 sprung up between them like a necessarily evil lovechild woefully holding the family together.

Big Top 24/7 Video opened off of the first exit within the city limits, a round brick building with a conical fiberglass roof, painted in garish red and yellow stripes that allowed a circus motif to almost veil a secret. The advertisement of private rooms and VHS sales likely did nothing to fool passing motorists looking for a reason to take their eyes off the road for even a second, but it fooled Hiccup.

When he was a teenager looking for something—anything—worth fighting with his dad over, he used to wonder how his dad was ok with circus animals being caged and made to perform for people’s entertainment right in the station’s backyard, especially given his dad wouldn’t even let him get a dog on the grounds that he was ‘irresponsible’. Hiccup threatened to do something about it once when he was about thirteen, but his dad assured him if he even so much as tried to run in that direction, he could spend the afternoon in the holding cell.

Again, Hiccup thought that was pretty rich coming from a guy who met his wife at an illegal protest to protect Berk’s last resident population of hibernating black bears.

Big Top 24/7 Video was torn down about seven years ago for the new jail to go in, and Hiccup wasn’t talking to his dad enough to gauge any sort of reaction. He imagines now that it was something like relief, if only because it was one less thing to answer his son’s ever instigating questions about, but he never got a chance to ask.

His dad died before Hiccup put together the truth that the untouchable circus of his youth was actually a dingy but surprisingly long-lived scheme to bring truckers together in the homosexually word-playing name of VHS porn and other so-called erotic novelties.

But from where he stands now? Well, he’d prefer cheap, fuzzy handcuffs to the ones that bruised his wrists as Grisly dragged him in front of a judge who invoked his father’s name like a bar he’d never meet. He’d love a ground floor ‘private’ suite with a VHS player as old as he is in the corner that he could rent by the hour over the cell he’s stuck in now, especially because a glory hole might provide a means of escape more viable than the bars on the window.

Plus, he knows for a fact he looks better in largely ill-fitting themed-garb than he does in oversized, itchy orange.

By early afternoon, even he can’t conjure enough detail about the dreary view to distract himself any longer.

What if Eretson is wrong? What if Grisly isn’t spending the day tied up with paperwork and in fact, he’s already caught up to Astrid?

Grisly would gloat, Hiccup knows that. He knows it in more blood-spattered detail than he cares to remember, but the only thing worse than remembering it is foreshadowing a repeat performance, this time with the ghost of the blood of someone he loves thrown in his face.
He’s never planned a murder, obviously, so he doesn’t really have a handle on how long it might take. He assumes it might take longer given that Grisly is surely going to try and make it look like an accident, since framing Hiccup while he’s literally incarcerated is sure to be a bit harder than framing him while he’s walking around alleys talking about murder.

But no matter how many times he tries to convince himself it could take days or weeks or even months for Grisly to clean up his mess, he flinches every time he hears footsteps in the hallway.

The stairwell door at the end of his floor creaks open and he wonders if Grisly will go for Astrid first, using the address he sent Dave’s foot to and cornering her. Another cell door swings open, scraping across the linoleum floor, and he wonders if maybe Snotlout is an easier or mouthier target to go after first.

A key turns in the exterior door to his solitary cell and he freezes, plastic slipper squeaking against his plastic foot and tearing the silence like wet paper.

No matter who it is, he’ll be stuck, for the first time in his life, with wishing he had said more even sooner and more often.

The door opens and he braces himself for Grisly’s maniacal grin, almost stumbling from the strength of his refusal to show shock when he sees Heather instead, pale and wide eyed, hair disheveled under a crooked police uniform hat.

“Thank fuck I guessed the right room,” she shuts the door quickly behind her and leans back against it, breathing hard. She’s wearing a police uniform jacket too, one that’s simultaneously way too big for her and way too short in a disarmingly familiar combination of borrowed hoodie and crop top.

“Heather.” Hiccup says dumbly, forgetting how to ask questions when he’s so busy trying to force the answers.

“I knew you were on this floor and I had to guess it’d be a smaller cell since Grisly said you were by yourself, but—”

“What are you doing here?” His second attempt at a question goes better, not that Heather gives any impression that she heard him.

“But I guessed right, so now it’s just…keys, I guess, which one of these is for the cell gate thingy.” She starts riffling through a ring of a few dozen keys, trying a couple of them in the barred gate between them but having no luck.

“I didn’t realize you’d officially joined the force.”

“Unless the cell key is on the other ring in the office that I can’t get into—“

“Was the official police tailor unavailable when they assigned you a uniform?” Hiccup laughs at his own half joke, shoulders so stiff they feel brittle, like he’ll shatter if she keeps looking through him like he’s not here.

“It’s Snotlout’s spare,” she pauses, swallowing hard and shoving one stretched cuff back up her arm from where it was covering her hand. He doesn’t need to ask if she heard about Snotlout getting shot, the sympathy almost verging on apology in her expression is enough.

“Ah, could have guessed that,” he nods, “I swim in his crop tops too. Or shirts, I mean shirts.” The joke falls so flat he almost thinks Heather is going to cry, but he’s glad she swallows it back, since
it would probably make him cry too and he’s not going to give Grisly that satisfaction.

“I’m not here to chat, I’m here to get you out of this cell.” She goes back to sifting through her keyring and Hiccup frowns, nearly collapsing onto the hard, metal bench against the wall of his cell. “Just give me a second—”

“You can’t break me out of jail.”

“I have Snotlout’s badge too,” she flashes him the shiny shield in her pocket, “that’s how I got in here.”

“Yeah, I’m in jail for murder, remember? You might have heard the judge said ‘no bail due to serial killings’?” He presses the heels of his hands against closed eyelids, “you can’t just let me out.”

“But you didn’t do it,” she says with such conviction that he wants to ask if she knows who did and he resents the distance she put between them more than ever.

No, they’re both to blame for the distance. He had what he thought were better reasons at the time, but they both said things they shouldn’t have and now they’re on either side of a barred cell wall.

“I got arrested for it.”

“Yeah, but that’s—I know you didn’t do it—”

“It doesn’t matter what you know!” He shouts, louder than he knows he should, suddenly full of resentment for even the implication that she could help him. It’s easier to know that no help is coming than it is to shove off insufficient help in the name of the ill-fitting position of ‘voice of reason’. “You can’t exhum e Johann for a confession and you can’t just let me out of jail.”

“Johann?” She snorts, but she gives up on the keyring too and Hiccup’s heart falls even though it’s what he was hoping for, “you think this has anything to do with Johann?”

“Doesn’t everything?”

“I…” She deflates the rest of the way, hugging Snotlout’s jacket tighter around herself and leaning back against the wall, yanking at her braid in frustration, “Admiral Hiccup Haddock.”

“You know my military career wasn’t quite that successful,” he rests the back of his head against the cold brick and stares at the ceiling, “and since when do you call me by my full name?”

“Grisly played me for Admiral Hiccup Haddock,” she continues, slumping down to sit cross-legged on the floor, keys forgotten in her lap. Maybe she just needed to talk.

As much as he’d like to, he can’t find it in himself to blame her.

“I know the feeling.”

“Do you?” Heather snorts, “he had me go on the news and talk about how absurd the whole theory is, I—any credibility I had—“

“Right, Grimborn credibility,” Hiccup cuts her off, gesturing at his jumpsuit, “I guess I’ve got that in spades now, you know, since Grisly framed me for a series of modern copycat murders.”

“I guess you get it then.” She has the sense to look at least a little sheepish and Hiccup sighs, rubbing his face.
“I’m sure that misogyny makes it worse.”

“Absolutely,” she nods, “I’d look way less stupid decrying the now practically proven Admiral Haddock theory on the news if I were a man.”

“Right, men get to make mistakes like that without it ruining their reputation.” He sighs, “I have to ask, ok? Just…when you say you know I didn’t do it, what does that mean?”

“I don’t know,” she winces like she always has when she lies, looking up through her eyelashes, “you put spiders outside—“

“You’ve worked closer with Grisly than anyone.”

“And I’m sorry for that, if I knew—”

“That he’d play you?” Hiccup hangs his head, running a hand through his hair and trying not to think about the crust near his face. “He only chose you because you’re more marketable than me, he practically admitted it. It could be you in here.”

“The name doesn’t help your case,” Heather twirls the keys around her finger, “there has to be some way to fix this, I—you have to have an alibi, or something.”

“An alibi,” he shakes his head, “not this time, I—I can’t bring Astrid into this. Not again, especially not now.”

“She’s been involved the whole time! Hell, she was just a suspect—”

“I just can’t.”

“What’s so different about now?” Heather looks like his friend when she’s worried and there are a million logical ways to answer that question. He could start with Grisly and end there, but instead the day catches up to him and his resolve breaks, his last important secret falling out of his mouth.

“Because I love her.”

“Oh.” Heather bites her lip, uncharacteristically quiet as she fidgets, scraping some gum off of the sole of her boot with a fingernail.

“Oh?” He prods.

“Does she—I mean does she know?” She continues before he can answer, slouching a little further against the wall, “as in does she know there’s a possibility of it?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Does she know that she’s your alibi for last night in particular?” Heather gestures at nothing, verging on frustrated and Hiccup frowns at her.

“Considering she was in my apartment with me all night and we slept together, I’m pretty sure she’s aware that we were together. Why do you ask?”

“Ok, ok, no need to be so defensive,” Heather holds her hands up.

“No need? Not like you just inferred I was stalking Astrid—”

“You hang out in a lot of creepy alleys near her apartment,” she laughs, “I had to check.”
“Your confidence in me—or lack-there-of is…” He trails off, “I missed it. I—friends? Please? I don’t need any other enemies.”

“Yeah,” she nods, “no one will believe me if I publish Johann now anyway…” Something in his expression wards her off of the topic like even she’s hesitant to rock a newly patched boat. “If we’re friends again, does that mean I get to give you relationship advice?”

“No—”

“Shouldn’t it be up to Astrid if she wants to be involved or not?”

“I just…Not this time, it’s too much to risk, I can’t…of course she’d want to be involved and—”

“Well then, what the hell else am I supposed to do? You won’t let me break you out, you won’t let me find your alibi, I’ve been working for the guy that got you into this mess and defamed me and there’s nothing I can do to redeem myself?”

He likes that she phrases it in terms of redeeming herself, not helping him. It makes it distant, comfortable, and gives him analytical breathing room he hasn’t had all day.

What could Heather do?

What hole exists in Grisly’s perfect plan that Heather could bore into? Hell, how’d he get so much right about Grimborn going off of Heather’s sensationalized tour information and an Admiral Hiccup Haddock book?

“That’s it!” Hiccup sits up straight, lowering his voice at Heather’s alarmed expression. “He had to fuck up somewhere. Not on the framing for murder, obviously, he’s good at that, but at the Grimborn. If he’s saying I did it to mimic Grimborn and you find somewhere in my Grimborn research that I disagree with what the modern case says—”

“Then it points to someone with a different Grimborn theory than you,” she stands up, tucking the stolen keys carefully in Snotlout’s jacket pocket. “It’s something, I can do that.”

“It might be enough, I think Grisly’s starting to crack under the pressure,” Hiccup lets himself hope for a second, not so long that he can’t shut it down before the long, lonely night ahead, but enough to make the dull light through the window seem livable. “Get in touch with Eretson, he seems to know where Astrid and Snotlout are, they can help.”

“Right, like I’d ask Snotlout for help with research this important.”

“No, I mean Astrid, she’s…she’s brilliant, ok?”

“I’ll keep an eye on her,” Heather scoffs, voice soft as she reaches for the handle to the room’s outer door, fingers lingering on the knob for a second, “take care of yourself, don’t drop the soap or —”

“Don’t remind me, I already had Grisly in my front pocket today, just…go. Don’t get caught stealing Snotlout’s keys.”

“Right,” Heather nods, somehow leaving the room a little more hopeful, if lonelier, than she found it.
“Does alcohol technically have an expiration date?” Tuffnut asks from the top of a rickety step stool as he clears out the top shelf behind the bar.

“Well if these guys are too chicken to try it, I volunteer,” Snotlout takes the plastic bag of white pills out of his pocket, glaring when Astrid snatches it from hands. “Hey!”

She squints at the pills, “didn’t you just take one of these?”

“Yeah, and it still hurts, since I got shot and all—”

“I’m sure your doctor told you how often to take these,” she doesn’t add the obvious addendum of ‘and they definitely didn’t say every half hour’.

“They aren’t from the doctor,” Snotlout takes the generously poured highball glass Tuffnut gives him, “Eretson grabbed them from evidence—”

“So, they are illegal drugs,” Fishlegs grumbles, too overwhelmed to be truly grumpy and Astrid takes the glass from Snotlout’s hand before he can assess its freshness.

“They were illegal before the police confiscated them,” he narrows his eyes at Astrid, “and like Astrid here, Eretson doesn’t want me to have any fun, because he got me the confiscated drugs without fentanyl.”

“Like Eretson, I keep trying to save your life for some reason. I’ll be right back,” she stands up, glass of scotch in hand, glancing apologetically at Fishlegs as she follows Tuffnut back into the small room behind the bar with a ‘staff only’ sign on the door. “Come on, Tuff.”

“Astrid!” Tuffnut whisper yells, planting his hands on her shoulders, “just the woman I was hoping to trade pants with.”

She blinks and looks at the glass in her hand before raising it to her lips and taking two healthy gulps. It’s smooth and complex and meant to be savored, like the morning she wishes she were having, but she’s at a bar with a pair of idiots and her traumatized boss instead of alone with Hiccup in bed, so she drains the glass quickly like the taste is something to be avoided and wipes her mouth on her sleeve.

Well, Hiccup’s sleeve, from his borrowed jacket, and her heart throbs unevenly, cramped by everything she’s bottling up to function right now.

“What’s the verdict?” Tuffnut narrows his eyes, “that stuff was allegedly thirty-six years old and the bottle was dusty, so I don’t know how much I trust the label.”

“Smooth,” she clears her throat, setting the empty glass down and frowning at Tuff, “what time is it?”

“Nine twenty-six, why?” He takes one hand off of her shoulder to check his watch. She almost asks am or pm, but the deserted bar answers that for her.

“Already a long day,” she shakes her head and exhales before re-committing to the scrap of logic she’s clinging to and shoving Tuffnut hard enough to stumble against an old, half-scrubbed copper still in the corner.
“Hey!”

“Stop giving away expensive alcohol, you need money! And especially stop giving it to the guy full of painkillers! I don’t need another murder investigation in my life,” she shoves him one more time when he tries to placate her, “and don’t ask people to trade pants with you. It’s off-putting.”

“Ok, but they’re technically my pants,” Tuffnut lowers his voice and glances at the only occupied table, “as in my property, and Snotlout is a cop, so technically I think he could force you to trade pants with me.”

“He’s a suspended cop,” Astrid recognizes a whirlpool of Tuff-logic that won’t release her until she engages it and wishes she hadn’t been so adamant about stopping the free expensive alcohol just now, “why do you want my pants?”

“My pants,” he corrects, “that I let you borrow, like the gentleman that I am, with no regard for my own pantsless-ness, expecting nothing but the pants themselves in return.”

“I’ll get you your pants back, I’m sorry if I’m a bit behind on laundry,” she scoffs, “I’ve been distracted in case you haven’t noticed.”

“No, no, no,” he shakes his head, eyes wide, “don’t wash the magic out, just trade me now—”

“Ok, I really don’t have the bandwidth to disprove magic pants to you right now—”

“Nothing to disprove, you borrowed my pants, you had sex with Hiccup with my pants, they’re magic sex pants and I need them.”

“I mean I took them off,” she argues for the sake of arguing, cheeks flushing even over the feeling of dread that Hiccup’s name invokes, “and how’d you know about…last night, anyway?”

“Hiccup came by this morning, you know how he is all creepy and awkward, lurking in alleys at odd hours,” he shrugs, “and the magic sex-adjacent pants are just going to have to do. I don’t know how long Mr. Moustache is going to be here.”

“Mr.—Fishlegs?”

“That thing’s glorious,” Tuffnut rubs his upper lip, “do you think if I kissed him hard enough it’d rub off on me?”

“I…” A few dozen non-answers and unanswerable questions float through her head until she takes a step back, tucking her hair behind her ear, “I’m going to keep your pants for now, Tuff.”

“The ones I’m wearing will make your butt look better,” he tries one last tactic, “my butt? Awful, but yours—”

“I don’t care,” she snaps, “in case you didn’t read the mood out there, Hiccup is in jail, he’s being framed—I—”

“That would make you testy,” Tuff pats her on the shoulder, “I had not, in fact, read the mood. You need the lucky pants more than I do, clearly.”

“We don’t share lucky pants, Tuff.” She sighs, shoving the panic back down and forcing her voice steady.
The bell on the front door jingles and she jumps, reflexively glancing around the small room for something she could use as a weapon. The glass she was just drinking out of is too light and the still is too awkward, and her fingernails bite into the heels of her hands as she leans her head through the doorway.

“What are you doing here?” Eretson asks Snotlout, barely pausing to set Astrid’s phone on the bar.

“How’d you get this?” She picks it up, frowning at the battery and the banner of notifications fighting for her attention.

“Getting my new friend Fishface a free drink,” Snotlout explains, kicking a foot onto the bar table like falling back wouldn’t literally kill him.

“Fishlegs,” he corrects in a small voice.

“I thought you were getting somewhere safe,” Eretson points at the back door, “the third murder site is less than a block away.”

“We’re just leaving,” Astrid’s mad at herself for not making that connection. Usually, stress helps her stay organized, but right now she doesn’t know if she’s ever felt more scattered. Maybe the scotch for breakfast wasn’t a great idea. “Where’d you get my phone?” She sees a missed text from Hiccup and her throat tightens in an anxious, grating way that makes her feel like if she doesn’t keep talking, she’ll lose the ability. “And why are you here? Where’s Hiccup? Why aren’t you at the station with him?”

“Does alcohol have an expiration date?” Tuffnut joins the conversation, leaning his forearm on Astrid’s shoulder and yelping when she grabs it and twists it behind his back. “Ouch! I thought we were asking him questions—”

“Questions about Hiccup,” she drops his arm and presses her fingers to her temple, pacing back and forth and waiting for Eretson to say something that makes sense because she doesn’t think anyone else is going to do her the courtesy.

“She has a point though, why are you slacking off at some bar instead of dealing with things at the station, like you said you would?” Snotlout’s expression is nervous even as his tone falls short and Eretson sighs, sitting in Astrid’s recently vacated chair and folding his hands on the table.

“Your phone was in evidence,” he says in a modulated, self-pacing tone, like he’s knowingly embarking on the first mile of a marathon without training and Astrid forces her knees stiff. “There have been some changes to the case.”

“What’d you fuck up now?” Snotlout asks and Fishlegs looks cautiously at Eretson, weighing how much new information he can take in.

The answer appears to be ‘none’ and Astrid almost mentally agrees with him. She’s almost full, almost done, almost overwhelmed to the point of excusing herself even partially from the situation, but no. If she’d done that at any point along the way, she might not be in this mess, but then she wouldn’t have done what she’s always done. What she’s always wanted to do, what dragged her into research and a midnight tour she had no business being on.

She’s going to get the facts and get to the bottom of this.

“What changes?”
Eretson enters the second mile with more determination than the first, “Grisly has taken over my position on the case—”

“How?” Snotlout blurts and Astrid claps her hand on his shoulder too hard to keep him from continuing.

“At my recommendation,” Eretson is almost sheepish and he swallows hard.

“And what possessed you to recommend that?” Astrid asks, refusing to accept how wrongly she might have judged him. There’s no point to that now, not as everything feels like it’s finally picking up speed towards something.

Good or bad depends on what Eretson says next.

“When I got to the station, Grisly was making a case to the judge about setting bail and as good as he’s been at ingratiating himself with the police—”

“Idiots,” Snotlout mumbles, shrugging Astrid’s hand off and she realizes how hard she’s been squeezing.

“He has no idea how to talk to a judge.” Eretson doesn’t look impressed with himself so much as calmer and Astrid fists her fingers so that they stop shaking. “And between that and the mountain of paperwork he’s currently going through, I thought it could buy me some time to build a case against him.”

“Ok, maybe this is the lack of fentanyl speaking,” Snotlout clears his throat, “but what use is a case against Grisly if you aren’t on the case to use it against him?”

“Considering fentanyl would have killed you by now, I’m pretty sure it’s just you speaking,” Astrid hisses, willing him to shut up.

“Because I’ve volunteered to represent Hiccup in court. Free of charge.”

Astrid blinks, trying to find someone to share her shock, but Fishlegs is staring deep into his beer’s amber gaze and Tuffnut is rolling his shoulder and scanning the fine print on the back of an antique bottle of scotch.

“You’re a lawyer?” Snotlout is shocked enough for everyone and angrier than he should be at someone who’s offering his cousin free legal representation.

“Is that a problem?”

“Yeah, it’s a problem. Do you want to know why it’s a problem?” Snotlout stands up, leaning on the table for support but going onto tip toes anyway. “You’re leaving my cousin to rot in jail while some crazy guy who shot me gets your case just so that you can live out some…Legally Boned fantasy?”

“Legally Boned?” Astrid mouths to herself, empty-stomached and scotch-full enough to wonder how he came up with something approximating clever while half-dead. She looks at Eretson for corroboration and finds him surprisingly flustered, the red on his cheekbones incongruous with his stern shoulders.

“He’s not rotting,” Eretson wipes his face with a surprisingly twitchy hand, “he’s waiting under lock and key while Grisly sifts through mountains of paperwork and I legally obtain a copy of his compiled evidence.”
“Don’t you talk all smart at me, it won’t work—”

“Let’s go back to Fishlegs’ place,” Astrid cuts in, “regroup further from the site of a murder.”

“Party at Fishlegs’ place!” Tuffnut hoots, bottle held over his head until Fishlegs stands up and takes it from him.

“Therapy session at my place,” Fishlegs confirms before informing Tuffnut’s crest-fallen face that he’s not invited.

“Right,” Eretson clears his throat and stands up, straightening his tie and nodding professionally at Astrid. “I’ll call when I know anything else.”

“Ok,” she frowns, “wait, you never answered, why was my phone in evidence?”

“Hiccup was at your apartment,” he says simply, “when Grisly caught him—"

“Allegedly.” She laughs, just guessing that Hiccup would have something funny enough about the situation to coax it out of her, “of course he was at my apartment when Grisly caught him *allegedly* murdering someone.”

Fishlegs lives in a small, clean house on the other side of the beltway, and Astrid tries not to think of her apartment when she sees his mismatched living room furniture. Her shell-shocked host regained some of his wits on the drive over and he gives them a brief hand-waving tour, which surprisingly ends with Snotlout slinking off towards the guest room mumbling about a nap.

“He’s not going to die, is he?” Fishlegs asks, offering Astrid the coffee that she realizes she sorely needs as soon as he says the words.

“Not at this point, I don’t think. Not of natural causes anyway.” She jokes and it doesn’t sound like Hiccup.

She wonders if this will go on long enough for the wry lilt preserved in her mind to fade.

The therapy session is cancelled on account of the fact that Astrid isn’t trusted by anyone, including herself, to say anything comforting, and Fishlegs makes up the couch before he has to head back to work. As much as Astrid wants to decline it, she’s tired and Snotlout’s snoring from the other room is like the soundtrack to an extended intermission. A forced break punctuated by interruptions reminding her that the real actors need time to reconfigure and prepare for the next act.

For someone who resented being involved for so long, being on the outside now is brutal, and she can’t stop wracking her brain for something—anything—she could do. The urge to go down to the station and correct the account of what happened the night before festers like an itch she can’t scratch and she checks her phone for the millionth time, hoping for a miraculous call from Eretson.

Instead, there’s a knock at Fishlegs’ front door.

It can’t be case related. That was the whole point in coming here, it’s a location entirely separated from anyone involved in the case. Maybe it’s Eretson, even, maybe Fishlegs gave him the address when Astrid wasn’t looking.
She could be sitting here, scared to make a sound, when Eretson is standing right outside with an absolved Hiccup.

The couch creaks when she jumps off of it, but she adamantly refuses to care, letting her feet fall tired and heavy on the way to the door to look through the peephole.

It’s not Grisly.

It’s not Eretson either.

It’s Heather, and when Astrid looks to either side of the front door, there’s no obvious weapon.

Heather knocks again, frown deepening, “Snotlout, I know you’re here.”

Astrid assesses her for a moment before swallowing hard and setting her jaw, sliding the deadbolt chain into place before unlocking the door and opening it just enough to glare through.

“What makes you think Snotlout is here?” She sets her shoulder, ready to slam the door shut as soon as Heather moves. Heather takes a step back instead of trying to take advantage of the gap, and Astrid narrows her eyes at the brown paper bag in her hand. “And what is that?”

If it’s a bomb, the thin door has no chance of shielding her, so she settles on an expression that might.

“Look…I just talked to Hiccup—”

“How?” Astrid tries not to let worry or fear or anything other than suspicion show on her face, and she can’t tell if Heather sees through her or if she continues what she always intended to say.

“He was under the impression that Snotlout and well…you, were with Eretson, so I should find him—”

“You asked for Snotlout.”

Heather’s sigh is commiserating but tight-eyed, “his location is on in Snapchat.”

“Just a second,” Astrid shuts and locks the door, leaving the deadbolt in place and walking back towards Fishlegs’ guestroom. She knows that the door won’t matter if it’s a bomb, or a gun, but this has gone wrong too many times to make stupid mistakes now. She knocks on the guestroom door hard and quickly enough to make her knuckles sing. “Snotlout! Wake up!”

“Just a second—”

She opens the door before he can find an excuse, “Heather is outside.”

“I thought you said Fishface didn’t know anyone at the station,” Snotlout hisses, but Astrid’s too frustrated to keep her voice down at this point.

“He doesn’t. She found us because you left your location on—”

“No, I didn’t—” He waves his phone around and she grabs it.

“Your Snapchat location,” she turns on airplane mode before he can take it back, “why were you checking Snapchat anyway?”

“Ruffnut sent me one—”
“Never mind, I don’t care,” Astrid yanks at her tangled braid, and exhales through gritted teeth, “now we have to get rid of Heather.”

“We? Who said anything about we?”

“The guy who potentially endangered his life to check Snapchat,” she grabs his arm, barely remembering to be gentle as she hauls him to his feet and back out into the living room. Heather is still on the patio, paper bag under her arm and Astrid cracks the door open again, “what do you want?”

Heather looks past her, obviously catching a glimpse of Snotlout and appealing to him with a surprisingly vulnerable expression, “I want to help.”

“You’ve been working for Grisly,” Astrid doesn’t accuse, she states the truth and Heather sets a stubborn chin.

“I know—”

“He shot me,” Snotlout butts in, “I almost died because your boss is a creep—”

“I know!” Heather drops the bag and it hits the pavement with a metallic thunk that makes Astrid freeze. It doesn’t blow, so not a bomb, but she feels better with it out of Heather’s hands, “I should have gotten out of it then—”

“Why now?” Astrid asks, leaning just enough sideways for Snotlout to see Heather’s face. “You say you’re here to help us, not Grisly. Why now?”

“He said you were smart.” Heather shakes her head, the corner of her mouth almost a smile, “actually no, he said brilliant—”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“Because Grisly humiliated me,” she shrugs, “worse, he made me humiliate myself, on live television, potentially in front of the entire country, I—and well, because he pinned it all on Hiccup.” The second half of the sentence is far less convincing than the first and Astrid slams the door, prepared to find a window and sneak out the back, but Snotlout stops her.

“Ok, I believe her.”

“You found that convincing?” Astrid hisses, heart in her throat when she thinks about Hiccup’s situation.

“The part about Hiccup? No, not at all. The other part.” He nods, “about Grisly humiliating her.”

“That would make her turn on him?” The idea sits wrong in her chest, impossible and dangerously hopeful, like finding exact change on the ground and wondering who’s reading her mind to put it there. “Not you getting shot but—”

“Hey Ms. Brilliant,” he teases, his tone as different from Hiccup’s as hers is and full of just as much worry, “we didn’t put that together until Grisly admitted it either.”

“Ok,” Astrid huffs, more than a little annoyed as she opens the door again, choosing her words carefully to avoid feeding the useless panic in her chest, “what did Hiccup want you to do if you found Eretson?”
“Grisly got all his info from me and that stupid Admiral Haddock book,” Heather picks the bag up and opens it to reveal stacks of paper, “I have Hiccup’s notes, he thought that if we found some difference between his opinions and the way the copycat murders happened—”

“He wanted our help with research?” Astrid’s hand itches towards the deadbolt and she curls it into a fist.

“Yours specifically,” Heather holds out the bag like an olive branch decorated in Hiccup’s hectic scrawl, “he really did say you were brilliant.”

Reading those papers is something she could do. Something she could contribute, something she could solve. Action she could take.

“Come in,” she acquiesces slowly and the slick sound of the deadbolt sliding free is opening a chamber that she can only hope to aim in the right direction.

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“That’s a ‘T’,” Heather says gently, leaning over the back of Fishlegs’ couch and pointing at a note on the margin of a crooked photocopy of page 328 of some Grimborn book she doesn’t recognize.

“I know that,” Astrid lies, the bad handwriting she’s been trying to decipher for ten minutes suddenly making sense.

“Oh. Good.” Heather sits down on the chair across from the couch and Astrid ignores her, tracing her fingertip over the letter that is supposedly a mutant ‘T’. “Hiccup’s handwriting is legendarily bad when he’s excited, I was just making sure—”

“I’ve got it.” Astrid hates that Heather has so much objective evidence supporting an unfortunate narrative that she knows Hiccup better. It’s not fair. It’s not true, but there’s no way to refute it.

“I don’t know who taught him to write,” the joke falls flat and Heather looks back at the notes on her lap, silent until Snotlout appears from the guest room, pale but maybe steadier than he had been that morning, “oh, Snotlout, I forgot to tell you. I’ve got your badge.”

“My badge?” He narrows his eyes at her.

“In the bag. With your gun,” she points at the suspicious paper bag of notes on the floor by her feet and Snotlout bends down to grab it, losing a civil dispute with gravity somewhere along the way and settling for sitting on the floor.

“His gun?” Astrid raises an eyebrow and Heather shrugs, motion tight and careful.

“I wasn’t going to leave it with Grisly.”

“Right, leaving things with Grisly isn’t safe.” The something, or someone, that she’s really talking about hangs in the air, only dispersed when the front door’s lock clicks open and Fishlegs steps into the room, pausing when he sees Heather.

“Hello.”

“Hi,” she waves, looking to Astrid for an introduction and seemingly ignoring her glare.

“This is Heather,” Astrid gestures, “she—long story—”

“Another one?” Fishlegs snorts, finally exhausted enough to laugh about it.
“Always. Anyway, she had the chance to talk to Hiccup earlier and he seems to think that researching his notes is a path forward somehow,” she waves the stack of papers on her lap at him, “so that’s what I’m doing.”

“Research,” Fishlegs gets two beers out of his fridge, hesitating a second before grabbing a third and only a third, glancing worriedly at Snotlout, who is now fully laying on the rug. “Well, I’m probably going to regret saying this, but let me know if you need any help.”

Fishlegs regrets it immediately.

Ok, maybe not immediately, he doesn’t seem to mind distracting himself from modern court cases by talking about their Victorian counterparts, at least for a night, but he definitely regrets it the next morning when Astrid accompanies him to open the archives. She settles immediately into the halfway set up Grimborn room, ignoring how the space makes her ache remembering Hiccup’s last visit.

It’s too late to dwell on what might have happened if she’d taken him up on his offer for a place to stay instead of sticking it out at Elizabeth Smith’s apartment, so she shoves that aside, focusing on the bookcase by the encyclopedias and the rickety copier to keep what she’s working towards front and center. There has to be a hole somewhere, something Hiccup noticed that Grisly didn’t, some guess Grisly made that Hiccup had already refuted.

Reading Hiccup’s notes is a uniquely brutal form of torture though. For all the insight they give into his thought process, they’re surprisingly dry without his gesticulating hands and the light behind his eyes. Every few minutes she has a new question for him, and she swallows them all down, forcing herself to focus on what she can do.

Not enough. It doesn’t feel like enough.

Near the end of her second full day of researching, Ruffnut drops by the archives with a duffle bag that she drops on Astrid’s desk, sending a stack of photocopied notes to the floor.

“You couldn’t set that on the floor?” She huffs, standing up to collect the pages and wobbling on feet that evidently fell asleep hours ago. It’s been unusually quiet, probably due to Grimbornologists turning to their dusty old copies of Viggo Grimborn Solved: The Admiral Haddock Connection in the wake of Hiccup’s arrest, and while she hasn’t minded the extra hours to pay rent in an apartment she can’t access, she has forgotten to get up periodically.

“No, ‘hey thanks Ruffnut for remembering that no matter how obsessive I get, I still need clothes and a toothbrush’.” She opens the bag and digs through it for what looks like a pill bottle, “and Tuff included multi-vitamins. Flintstones shapes.”

“I’m shocked he didn’t make the delivery himself to get a shot at ‘Mr. Moustache’.” Astrid jokes easily, pretending that it doesn’t hurt.

It’s not logical, she rationally knows that she barely knows Hiccup. They’ve been on one date, and in her experience, emotionally supporting someone through murder investigations isn’t really a stepping stone on the way to a relationship, but she can’t explain away the fact that she misses him. She can’t make a joke without wishing he heard it. She can’t wake up with her back hurting from Fishlegs’ couch without wondering how much worse his jail cell is.

“He was going to,” Ruffnut sighs, perching on the table Astrid has appropriated and folding a sheet of notes that escaped the bag’s onslaught, “I think he’s nervous. I didn’t know he could get nervous, but this is a new kind of behavior, so I’m guessing.” Her eyes ask Astrid how she’s
doing, and Astrid looks away, hoping for something to help her change the subject.

She doesn’t expect to see Snotlout and Heather walking down the stairs together, suspicious but overall polite expressions on their faces, but they’ll do.

“Any news?” She gives up organizing the mess that Ruffnut made with her notes.

“Not from our end, you?” Heather cuts in, her polite, eager smile forceful enough that Astrid bites her lip against telling her to butt out.

It’s nothing against Heather personally, really. Astrid would feel the same about anyone who was working with Grisly up until a few days ago when he made a fool of them and their ego prompted their conscience to wake back up and evaluate which side of the serial murderer they were on.

“Nothing much,” Ruffnut shrugs, giving Snotlout an all too easy wave.

Astrid wishes it were awkward.

She wishes Ruffnut was stilted and apologetic and Heather felt like an outsider due to her choice of company the last couple of months. She wishes Snotlout was tired or listless like he was the first couple of days out of the hospital, instead of snickering as he flicks paper footballs across the table. The friend-group that he was so determined to enlist her in seems to be going strong, even though she wishes it would leave her alone until she figures her bigger issues out.

Eretson does his best kill the relatively congenial mood when he swings by after five, forcibly casual about the fact that Snotlout invited him even as he looks at Astrid with official focus and clears his throat.

“Do you have anything?”

“Not yet,” she admits, sheepish, “you?”

“Some thoughts, nothing concrete.”

“Whatever, I think we can prove pretty easily that Hiccup didn’t murder a bunch of people,” Snotlout snorts, “I mean let him talk to anyone and it’s pretty obvious.”

“Do you mean a psych evaluation?” Eretson wipes his hand down his face.

“Well, no, I meant literally anyone talking to him would know that he’s not a cold-blooded killer —”

“You’re right, a psych eval is the first thing I should have done,” Eretson chastises himself and pulls his keys back out of his pocket.

“That’s what I said!” Snotlout waves him towards the door, “that’s the first thing you should have done.”

“I’ll come with you,” Astrid starts to stand up, but Eretson shakes his head.

“Visiting hours are over and I can’t sign you in without my badge.” It’s a weak excuse, probably hiding one of his unsolidified thoughts, and being kept in the dark is as bitter as ever. “Maybe next time.”

“Sure,” she communicates how little she believes him with her eyes, and he leaves without saying anything else. It’s barely silent long enough for her to try and find her place when Snotlout starts
talking, stretching his arms over his head with a wince.

“Really though, it’s obvious, they should just put me on the stand, and I’ll explain how Hiccup isn’t sadistic.”

“No,” Heather cuts across, voice suddenly sharp as she points at Snotlout with a rigid finger, “we’re not doing this—”

“Not doing what?” Astrid cocks her head.

“I’m just saying, if the judge let me tell my story, they’d have their proof that Hiccup didn’t serial kill anyone.”

“They’d have their proof that you’re an idiot,” Heather argues, and Astrid hates the idea of some shared truth about Hiccup that they know and she doesn’t.

“Why not both?” She waves at Snotlout, “he can look stupid and prove Hiccup innocent at the same time, can’t he?”

“I think you’re over-estimating his ability to multitask,” Ruffnut says, sour for being left out of the conversation this long, “but I want to hear the story that Heather really doesn’t want to hear.”

“Trust me, you don’t,” Heather tells Astrid in particular, “it’s not as great as he thinks it is.”

“You say it could prove Hiccup’s innocence?” Astrid asks and Snotlout squints slightly, thinking hard, then nods. Astrid waves him on and Heather groans, rubbing her closed eyes with her fingertips.

“Ok, so, he’d just started giving his stupid, creepy tours, right? Or I guess it’d been a while because he was getting pretty used to picking up girls on his creepy tours,” Snotlout starts and Astrid’s expression freezes in place as she nods him along.

“You don’t have to tell it,” Heather sighs.

“Everyone else wants to hear it, Heather, me included,” he clears his throat and folds his hands together on the table, “so I was kind of used to getting home to Hiccup’s locked bedroom and his dumb coat on the floor, so I didn’t think anything of it and got an after work beer and turned on the game.”

“If you regale me with a Patriots victory right now—” Astrid’s jaw flexes with impatience caped in jealousy and Snotlout rolls his eyes.

“I didn’t get to watch the end of the recap because right around the end of the third quarter, Pats were ahead by fourteen—”

“Snotlout.”

“Suddenly, Hiccup’s bedroom door opens and he’s ushering some girl out into the living room. She’s obviously not done with him and kind of pissed at the situation, he’s bright red and stuttering about an Uber and like, hopping around on one foot to hand her a shoe,” he pauses to laugh so hard it comes out as a wheeze and Astrid forces her face flat to wait for the point, “and then…oh God, I can’t breathe—and then when she leaves, I ask him what happened, of course, and he gets even more awkward.” His tone turns nasal, “‘She umm erm uhhh, well you see, she called me Viggo and asked me to choke her’—”
“Anytime, Snot, you can stop at any time.” Heather looks at Astrid in commiseration.

“No, you can’t stop now,” Ruffnut laughs, “did he do it?”

“No! That’s the point!” Snotlout waves his good arm in her vague direction, “apparently he completely lost his…” His words decay into giggles for a second and Astrid and Heather share another miserable glance. “And he told her that he drank too much, but he hadn’t had anything to drink and she knew that—”

“Oof,” Ruffnut snickers pointedly at Astrid, “sorry about your future sex life. If Hiccup ever gets out of jail, that is—”

“Don’t encourage him,” Heather cuts her off, glare reasonable but piercing, a paper shredder turned deadly rather than a blade turned on someone, and Astrid can’t help but feel grateful when it works.

“No, that’s the thing though, how could he kill a bunch of people while thinking about Vino Grapeborn if he couldn’t even stay hard—”

“Oh my god,” Astrid cradles her head in her hands, not flinching away when Heather puts a friendly hand on her arm.

Bonding through emotional trauma could be the title of her year.

“He’s not a sadist, and that’s my proof, put me on the stand.” He laughs again, “if you want proof he’s a bottom, you can ask him about the time he lost the key to his stupid fuzzy handcuffs and I had to get them off with a bolt-cutter. Even he thought that one was funny, later. Way later—”

“Maybe visits to the conjugal trailer won’t be totally boring after all,” Ruffnut supplies and Astrid kicks her under the table, ignoring her grunt and turning to Snotlout.

“How many pain pills have you had today?”

“None,” he shrugs his good shoulder, “just some Advil.”

Heather looks apologetically at Astrid, who blinks, the uselessness of this conversation funneling towards anger, because more despair isn’t an option right now.

“You know, I’m just going to round the number to fifty, ok? Can you help me remember that?”

“Fifty what?” Snotlout asks and Ruffnut opens her mouth to make some unwelcome guess before Astrid continues.

“I think I’ve wanted to hit you fifty times since you got shot, and I’m just going to count up from here.” She starts packing up her notes, wondering how authentically it will come across if she asks Heather to go somewhere else with her to never talk about that story again.

“You can’t hit me,” Snotlout rolls his eyes, “I’ve got injured immunity, I definitely can’t defend Hiccup’s absolute lack of sadism if you kill me with your temper.”

“You’ll heal,” she smiles sweetly and Snotlout looks to Ruffnut for backup.

She shrugs, “maybe you should just let Grisly finish you off. It’d be faster.”

“Then there’d be no one for Astrid to take her frustration out on,” Snotlout quips and Astrid grits her teeth.
“Fifty-one.”

Heather shakes her head and scribbles on a piece of scratch paper, “I’ll start a tally.”
Chapter 26

Hiccup has had one other psychological evaluation. It was when he got out of the hospital, and it went about the same as this one.

In other words, not well.

It turns out that being a white male with a rough relationship with an impossible to please, now absent father figure who also happens to have a long history of childhood bullying raises some red flags. At least last time he was fifteen and still theoretically moldable, instead of a twenty-five-year-old serial murder suspect who just happened to spend the last few years giving nightly tours about the very murders he allegedly copied.

So maybe it went worse this time.

The one bright point was probably the crack in the psychologist’s clinical veneer when Hiccup assured her that no, in fact, he did not have any history of killing animals and he actually loved his childhood cat very much until it died at the ripe old age of eighteen. Of natural causes.

When assuring a mental health professional that he does not now and never has enjoyed torturing animals is a high point, it’s safe to say that this has been a long week. A long month, really. A long year.

Hell, a long life.

Jail has a way of stretching minutes into hours and squeezing hours into dull, ceaseless blinks of an eye. He understands now why people used to mark the dungeon walls when they got fed or caught a glimpse of the sun, because the days blurring together is enough to make Hiccup feel as crazy as the psychiatrist assumed he was.

Not that his version of crazy would ever mean killing cats. His version of crazy appears to mean long, elaborate daydreams of a private shower with a locking door, and also practically unfettered glee when he sees his lawyer because that means he gets to go to a room with a comfortable chair for a while and talk to someone not assuming his guilt.

A straight-faced guard in an NWF uniform walks Hiccup down to the long bank of stalls along a plexiglass barrier. The guard gestures to the last stall and Hiccup sits down in the office chair that might as well be a throne of perfectly fluffed pillows after sitting on his thin mattress all day. His back relaxes enough to hurt, and he exhales a long, slow breath and focuses on Eretson filling out a form before taking the seat on the other side of the plexiglass and picking up the dingy white plastic phone.

“How are you?” Eretson asks out of politeness, not expecting a real answer.

Hiccup almost gives him one anyway, but he doesn’t think it would make him feel any better to say that he’s in jail, it’s miserable, he’s been terrified for so long that he’s mostly just exhausted, and he doesn’t think the psychiatrist liked him very much because she didn’t laugh at any of his jokes.

He settles instead for, “I’m here.”

“How is everything going?” Eretson asks, writing on a legal pad in neat, oversized block letters. Grisly?
They can’t be sure if anything is being recorded on the ancient phone system, but silence is suspicious too.

“Oh, you know, I’m just being in jail. It’s pretty lonely not talking to anyone but your lawyer,” Hiccup laughs, not explicitly trying to sound tired but not holding it back either.

“Any family that you want to visit? I know your mom has been in contact.”

Hiccup swallows hard, “it’s a long flight, she doesn’t need to spend the money just to see me make a fashion statement in orange.” It doesn’t stop him from thinking about her though, how confused she’d be. How angry she’d be if she knew the truth.

His mom is the only woman who ever made his dad back down from an argument and for a second, he lets himself imagine that she could save him. Yell at Grisly, start a picket line, demand reform.

But Grisly isn’t someone to yell at. He’d have no issue adding to his body count.

It makes Hiccup want to scream, and rave, and get a poster-board at a busy intersection to help him spread the truth, and if it were his own life he was risking, he’d do it. But it’s not.

“How is everyone?” He asks, and if Eretson knows who he’s really asking about, he doesn’t show it. His poker face is exhausting, adding to the dreary blur of days in jail. If Hiccup had been making marks on the dungeon wall for every time he won a reaction out of someone, he’d have a single mark made immediately after being placed in his cell, awarded for getting under Grisly’s skin during processing.

“Everything is fine,” Eretson could be lying and Hiccup probably wouldn’t know it, but the thought of something happening to Snotlout or Astrid and not even knowing is too much to even speculate on. It’s the kind of thought that keeps him up at night, counting dimples in the popcorn ceiling to fill the dead space in his mind. “I do want to talk about your options moving towards a trial.”

“Oh God, did the profiler tell you that I’m crazy?” Hiccup laughs under his breath, “because I think she confused my attempts at humor for debilitating psychological issues.” He continues babbling when Eretson doesn’t laugh, “not that I know anything about that. I’m just speaking from what I’ve seen on TV.”

“The profile is just one piece of the case,” Eretson assures, “and you don’t quite fit the profile of a serial murderer.”

“What does ‘not quite’ mean? Is it just the white male, daddy issues thing or did some of my answers partially fit the serial murderer profile?”

“For future reference, saying that Viggo Grimborn is a ‘hobby’ is a bit suspicious.”

“I’ll file that away for the next time I get criminally profiled,” Hiccup nods, “with my luck I’ll probably need it. Should I have said that I actually picked up yoga like my doctor told me to?”

“I finally got access to Grisly’s evidence file,” Eretson changes the subject and Hiccup bites the inside of his cheek to keep from asking if he’s ever laughed, even once, “and it’s going to take a while to look through it all and compare it to my own, but so far it’s more airtight than I would have expected.”

Hiccup has never been very good at not saying what he feels, or even delaying saying what he
feels, but glancing at the NWF guard out of the corner of his eye helps him shove his rant back down.

“Oh.”

“Of course, forensics is still working, but that could take months—”

“Months?” Hiccup knows the theory of the word, in that the year is broken into twelve more or less even pieces consisting of approximately thirty days each. There’s something about the moon in there too. But in practice? The concept of spending months in this limbo is foreign and impossible, defying some belief held so strongly that it feels like a physical law. “How long have I been in here?”

“Five days.”

“And you’re saying months until a trial.”

“Under current timelines, yes.” Eretson goes to make another note but then decides against it, speaking carefully instead. “And given the unique circumstances of your situation, I don’t believe that waiting months is the best path forward.”

Hiccup hears the truth between the words: Leaving Grisly to his own devices for months gives him more time to bulletproof his lies and clean up his evidence. His throat tightens when he thinks of Astrid and how much danger she’s in.

“Have you told anyone what I told you about…the case?” He tries, “you know, about their um, continued involvement in the case as it progresses?” His eyes scream about Grisly’s threats and Eretson must get the message because he shakes his head.

“No, I haven’t, I think it’s best to minimize Miss Hofferson’s involvement at this point, given all how many times her name comes up in the file.”

Hiccup doesn’t know Miss Hofferson. Miss Hofferson threatened a harassment claim at one point, sure, but she ceased to exist when Astrid came into the picture. Astrid with her glares and her bony fists and misty eyes when she looks at old books. Astrid impatient for the truth, impatient for the point of a roundabout story, always moving and trying and inviting him to try too.

“Don’t you think…I mean, wouldn’t it be better for her to know the situation?” His throat is dry, and swallowing doesn’t seem to help.

“I thought of something that could potentially move the process along faster,” Eretson ignores Hiccup’s question, not unkindly just devoted to keeping the meeting on track, and Hiccup presses the phone closer to his face, forcing himself to focus. “We haven’t considered a plea deal.”

“A plea deal? Like taking a driving course to knock a few points off of a driving ticket?”

“In this case, a confession and promise to divulge information about anyone else involved in the case in exchange for a reduced sentence.” Eretson writes on the pad, *Grisly coerced you into the last murder, then turned on you.*

Hiccup’s heart pounds in his ears. One murder, not four. It would be a better ratio if they were talking about any other crime. One car stolen, not four. One house broken into, not four. But as someone who has committed zero murders, confessing to one feels monumental and terrifying and stupid.
While he can’t honestly say he’s spent much time trying to be successful, he has made a conscious effort to not absolutely ruin his life, and confessing to a murder he didn’t commit in order to tell a bunch of lies connecting him to the man who did sounds like a very quick way to undo all of that.

“Reduced sentence, not no sentence.”

“It gives us leverage too,” Eretson insists, “we can argue the conditions of you coming forward with information and include minimum sentence before appeal for probation or insist on a certain facility that’s better than here.”

“So trading months waiting for trial for some as of yet unspecified amount of time in a different cell?” Hiccup snorts, “is there a catalog? Do I get to choose my bedsheets and pick out a plant for the window?”

“The prosecution would no longer have months to prepare for a trial. As it is, they have plenty of time to build their case.” The ‘and do other things like horribly murder your remaining loved ones’ is an unspoken addition.

“Do you think it would work?” Hiccup lets himself think about it, glazing over the moment he’d have to sit in front of his father’s oldest frenemy and say that he took someone’s life.

How deep can Grisly’s cover really go? He thinks of the man’s empty office, his horde of creepy guards seamlessly integrating with multiple levels of law enforcement. How long would someone have to dig to find something wrong? Would a name brought up in a plea deal be enough?

“I have witnesses,” Eretson says, scrawling Jorgenson in purposeful letters on the pad.

“The benefit then, is that we have a chance to direct the investigation.”

“Towards the truth, of course.”

“Right, the truth.” As much as Hiccup has played fast and loose with the rules, he’s always had a steady commitment to the truth, but telling it didn’t save him. Hell, telling the truth now would get people killed, and the silence is starting to be so deafening he’s wondering if the affects will be permanent.

“Think about it,” Eretson starts to stand up and Hiccup fumbles for something else to talk about, anything to get some more time out of character as ‘obedient inmate’, but he’s too slow and Eretson hangs up the phone.

He almost knocks on the plexiglass to get his attention before remembering that’s strictly against the rules, and his hand freezes mid-air when he looks over Eretson’s shoulder and sees who’s turning away from the front desk after filling out a form.

It’s Astrid.

She’s wearing a glare that could melt the barrier between them if she aimed it his direction instead of at Eretson and a jacket she must have borrowed from Hiccup’s coat closet. Her arms fly out from her sides as she argues then she shoves her hands in her pockets and narrows her eyes, an expression he instantly recognizes as seething doubt. She was clearly asking for something she thought she wasn’t going to get, and now that she’s won it, she’s unsure if it’s real.

Then, she looks at him and her eyes widen as her shoulders slump, relief that he can hardly fathom having anything to do with him flooding across her features.
He smiles the first real smile he’s had since she was tangled in his hoarded sheets and everything seemed like it would be ok and waves and she waves back, one half limp hand raised to shoulder height.

Eretson crosses his arms, shoulders rigid then relaxing as he points at the chair he just vacated, saying something else that makes Astrid shoot him a sharp look before hurrying to the other side of the glass. She practically falls into the chair, picking up the phone with shaking fingers and holding it to her ear.

He loves her.

“Hi,” Hiccup starts, anticlimactic, and Astrid’s mouth splits into a wide, tired smile.

He loves her and she isn’t safe here. Not with the NWF guard at the door, not with Grisly just a buzz away.

“Hi,” she bites her lower lip and leans forward on her elbows on the ledge in front of the window, and if it weren’t for the plexiglass, he could kiss her. “Eretson isn’t happy that I’m here, he told me not to follow him because visiting hours were over, but I checked online and, well—”

“And you’re here.” And he loves her, and he doesn’t want to tell her in an itchy jumpsuit over a dirty jail phone, but it’s so true and so much that he’s not sure he’ll have a choice. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“I’ve been told ten minutes and no discussions of ‘substance’,” she air-quotes around the word and his palms itch with how much he wants to touch her.

Eretson is standing by the door and Hiccup idly wonders if he has his gun or if he had to turn that in to step into his lawyer shoes. Either way, his presence feels protective, and Hiccup already told Astrid once that she shouldn’t be here, he can’t be expected to do that again. Not when she’s right across from him, not when it’s been so long since he’s seen a friendly face.

“That works for me, I don’t have anything of substance to talk about.” He shrugs and she smiles, soft and fond in a way he definitely doesn’t deserve. She’s obviously exhausted, the dark circles under her eyes making his chest ache even as the sight of her in his jacket lets him feel like he’s protecting her in some tiny way while he can’t do anything else. “How are you?”

“I’m fine, you?”

“I’m here.” It hurts more the second time.

“Yeah,” she looks back at Eretson for a second before scooting her chair closer to the glass, “that was a stupid question. You look like hell.”

“Thanks,” he wipes a hand over his stubble and his cheeks heat up.

“No, not—the beard is fine,” her smile is faint and secret and too far away, “it’s more just…” She waves her hand at him and he rolls his eyes.

“You just gestured to all of me.”

“All of you except your beard,” she clarifies before checking on Eretson again. She’s not built for levity in this kind of situation and he can see a serious depth sneaking back into her eyes. “Everything’s a mess.”
“Hey now, that sounds like ‘substance’,” he redirects, “how’s Snotlout?”

“When his shoulder is better to the point that I won’t literally kill him, I’m going to hit him sixty-seven separate times,” she sets her chin, resolute, “I have a tally.”

“Are you sure he’s ok? That sounds a little low.”

She laughs, a tinge of mischief clouding the worry in her expression, “he’s ok. He made a point yesterday to tell me his favorite story about you.”

“Oh God,” Hiccup’s stomach falls as his eyes widen, “what favorite story is that?”

“You know,” she tucks her hair behind her ear but it doesn’t stay, falling back against her flushing cheek, “some girl called you ‘Viggo’ and—”

“Yes, that one.” If Grisly came in right now and offered to kill him to make this easier, he might just let him. “Which version was it?”

“There are different versions?”

“No,” he drags his palm down his face, “not—I wish there were, every other Snotlout story is blown out of proportion so much it’s easy to call bullshit, but that one…he tells that story with unflinching accuracy and dedication to the truth.” He shakes is head, wishing he had a bucket of ice to put out the fire on his face, “sometimes there are sound effects, I’m shocked you’re here.”

“No sound effects,” she shakes her head, “maybe he’ll do those in court though, he seems to think he can prove your innocence.”

“I think I’d rather plead guilty than listen to Snotlout tell that story in court.” He laughs, but it brings Eretson’s plea deal back into his conscious mind. Just as a concept to get used to, as something neutral that takes up space in his brain until he decides what to do about it.

“Don’t even joke about that,” she whispers, crossing her legs and tapping an anxious foot in the air. “I’ve been looking at this from every angle and I haven’t found anything yet.”

“That’s definitely substance—”

“Eretson isn’t listening,” she mutters, “and if I don’t do something useful, I’m going to scream, I—”

“Hey, it’s ok,” he lies, and he can’t help thinking of Grisly’s promise, “you’re safe, that’s what matters—”

“That’s a copout,” she glares, tired and alive and his chest throbs, “there has to be something that we can do.”

“I can’t do anything.” he hates how bitter he sounds, honest for the first time in days, and something about Astrid’s solid expression is almost shocked, like she expected better or at least different of him. “I can barely keep the days straight, I—Hell, I told a psychologist that Viggo Grimborn is a hobby and now they think—well, I guess they already thought given that I’m here—”

“Hiccup,” she sighs, palm on the plexiglass, fingertips that he can’t touch smudged with ink and library dust.
“Eretson said that a trial could take months,” he leans his head on his hand, “and I know that, rationally. I know that big, newsworthy trials for serial killers take months to put together, but I guess—I don’t want to do this here.”

“Do what?”

“Anything.” Even he thinks he sounds pathetic now and Astrid’s frown turns disappointed, which is worse than just sad. “I just feel useless.”

“I can see that.” If it were pity in her voice, it would shut him down, but it’s not. It’s something different, something stronger. Something annoyed, and he realizes for the first time, she’s dragging him along a path of her choice, and him digging in his heel isn’t going to stop her.

He looks at her hand and his jumpsuit and his blurry reflection that he can see superimposed over her face on the plexiglass if he stares hard enough. He loves her. He thinks about that ill-fated breakfast run and what he’d be doing now if things had gone differently.

“I guess…I spent the last few years in complete stasis, just giving tours and knowing what every day would look like before it began. And then, well, you.” Then he fell in love with her. No, she changed everything before he did that, but that doesn’t make it sound any less corny. He wouldn’t have thought she was in the mood for corny, but her eyes soften slightly even as she holds her frown in place. He forces himself to keep talking so that he doesn’t backtrack over anything he hasn’t decided to say yet, “and I think for the first time in a while, I thought these next few months were going to be different.”

“How?” Of course she asks the question most likely to make him look like an idiot.

“Aside from well, you maybe being around I hope, umm,” he clears his throat and presses the phone closer to his ear to continue, “and well, I guess I have to finally figure out what I’m going to do with my life? Because it isn’t sensationalizing murders that are still destroying everything I love about this city even a hundred years on, and,” he swallows hard and laughs, a sharp, surprised sound, “and I think I was looking forward to it, almost. But now that’s not happening because my next few months are all booked up. Literally.”

“Well, you have plenty of time to think about it,” she tries and fails to cushion the statement and it makes him smile even as his heart sinks, heavy and exhausted and desperate.

What are the chances she’s still going to look at him like that after months?

“That’s true.”

“I’ll figure out how to book a conjugal trailer and we can work on your resume,” she offers, evidently satisfied with his suggested path forward. “

“You shouldn’t,” he tries to swallow against the knot in his throat when he thinks about her on jail property, alone with him, and Grisly’s promised intent rings in his ears. Months. What are the chances she can evade Grisly for months if she can’t go five days without ending up here? “It’s not safe.”

“I obviously need to, just a few days of this and you sound like Eretson.”

“Eretson’s right, Astrid.” He sighs and rubs his hand over his face. He could tell her. The NWF guard behind him couldn’t make a move with cameras and Eretson standing right there in the lobby. If he told her, then she’d know to run far away and—and he doesn’t now how deep Grisly’s cover goes.
“I can take care of myself.” Plus, looking at her fierce blue eyes, he knows that she wouldn’t run.

Months. Months of chances. Months of not seeing her every day, or at all, if she’s doing what’s best for herself. Months of limited information and fear that the next snippet that makes it through the bars on his cell will be bad.

He’s right, it is time to figure out what he’s going to do with his life, and while he has decidedly fewer choices than he thought he would, the answer is still obvious.

“Eretson’s right about a lot of things,” he sighs, hoping she’ll go easy on him and knowing that’s impossible, “he thinks I should take a plea deal.”

“I told you not to joke about that—”

“I’m not joking.” He shakes his head, taking in her furious expression. It’s slower blooming than normal, jaw flexing and setting forward before the blue fire is truly lit in her eyes. She’s tired, after five days, and she doesn’t now half of the truth. He loves her, and the only draw to finally getting his shit together is that he’d be doing it with her. He doesn’t get to do that now, but he can do something for her.

He could tell himself that he’s doing it for Snotlout or for whoever would be unlucky enough to cross Grisly’s path next, but since he’s already planning to lie himself into a prison sentence for a murder he didn’t commit, he should probably stick to the truth, at least internally.

“That decision is going to last more than months, Hiccup—”

“Yeah, and it’s about more than time.” He almost tells her then, but he’s not sure what good it would do when she’s staring at him with something like hatred. Too shocked, too sad, too helpless. She looks like she wants to smack some sense into him and he’d let her if it meant he could touch her before he takes this step he knows he can’t retreat from.

He wonders, briefly, if the real Viggo Grimborn ever thought about turning himself in. When the fervor died down and no one mentioned him in the paper anymore. Maybe he took a Victorian plea deal and got arrested for something else, something smaller, something forgiveable, but barely. And only to some.

If only Astrid didn’t forgive him for harassment, then he might have that ‘get out of trouble free’ card to spend now.

Except he wouldn’t need it then, because he would have done his community service and gone right back to giving tours, staying across the street to respect a fifty-yard boundary. No matter what, Astrid was destined to disrupt the monotony of his life, he just hoped one of the roads didn’t lead to a courtroom.

“Hiccup,” she says his name in a tone he doesn’t recognize, half-pleading and half-insulting, both uncomfortable for her. She opens her mouth again wordlessly, obviously unsure what to say to bring her pep talk back on track.

“You were right, there is something I can do.”

“No—”

“Visiting hours are over,” the NWF guard appears behind Hiccup, heavy hand on his shoulder as he looks at Astrid, recognition flickering in his otherwise brainwashed eyes. “Time’s up.”
“I’m not done here,” Astrid stands up, phone still pressed to her ear, glare dialed to the maximum even as Eretson steps into the room behind her and says something to get her attention.

“Let Eretson give you a ride,” Hiccup says, memorizing how her eyes on him feel, even through plexiglass, even furious and confused, “please.”

His cell is smaller than before. The bed is less comfortable, the walls colder, the single light in the ceiling flickering at just the right frequency to prevent him from thinking. His jumpsuit is itchy and his back is either too tense to hurt, or the sensation is entirely drowned out by the dull throbbing in his chest. Most of the time, when people sacrifice themselves for the greater good, it’s faster than this. It’s jumping in front of a bullet, not waiting alone for hours to invoke due process like a spell.

He can’t say he’s surprised when the door to the hallway opens, and he’s definitely not surprised to see Grisly, monochromatic and rigid, danger stuffed carefully out of sight for the time being. Hiccup’s relief is palpable and gruesome, he hates knowing what the man looks like after a kill, but he’s glad to know that this sober expression isn’t it.

“I heard Astrid visited today,” Grisly’s smile blooms slowly as he steps out of range of the hallway cameras and Hiccup rolls his eyes.

“Yeah? Did a little birdie tell you?”

“I trust you didn’t tell her anything sensitive,” he gloats, a cat pinning a mouse’s tail down and watching it struggle.

But Hiccup isn’t struggling, not anymore. He’s not trying to escape, he’s steering into the skid. He’s a mouse full of rat poison, ready to dive into the belly of the beast.

“Oh, so you can’t get the recordings from those visiting phones? Eretson was wondering about that, thanks for the tip.” He jokes, voice even, and Grisly straightens his uniform. Hiccup wonders if he designed the NWF uniforms himself, and the thought strikes him as kind of pathetic. Less of a wolf in sheep’s clothing and more of an institutional fanboy, a blatant self-insert too self-conscious to be believable.

At least when Hiccup puts on an act, he gets real antiques. He commits.

“I just thought I’d remind you of her…precarious situation.” It’s bluster, painted on thick and smudged before it could dry into armor.

“Trust me, I couldn’t forget it if I tried.”

“Good,” Grisly’s smile is cracked around the edges, veneer wearing thin after a long day at an office job he hates, “you seem to be taking something seriously for once. You know, maybe all of this has been good for you.”

“The legal system is supposed to rehabilitate people after all,” Hiccup shrugs, on the weird end of a paternal lecture from someone he respects so little that he feels the need to make it clear. “Maybe I’ll finally be an upstanding citizen when this is all over.”

“Upstanding,” Grisly’s lip curls, eyes manic and alive for just a second before he wipes has hands on his pants and selects one key off of his keyring, “if it keeps your spirits up…”

“Oh yeah, I’m downright chipper,” Hiccup nods, “catching up on my sleep. So, if you don’t mind,” he points at the evening sky outside and fakes a yawn.
Grisly grits his teeth, feral for a second, canine too sharp, “of course. Can I get you anything else while I’m being so accommodating?”

“I think I’m good for now,” Hiccup waves him towards the door, “I’ll let you know though.”

Grisly leaves then, shoulders rigid, and Hiccup hates how the silence makes him wish he’d dragged out the conversation longer. He tells himself that this will be over soon and tries to think about his new tour, a thrilling, courtroom-based tale of murder and eventual, inevitable betrayal.
“I need to stop and fill up,” Eretson mumbles ten silent minutes into the ride back to Fishlegs’ house.

“How dare you?” The silence shatters like physical bonds and Astrid sits up straight in the passenger seat, arms crossed to keep herself from hitting him.

Or at least not hitting him yet. She still might hit him, but not now, not until he explains where he left his brain.

“I can make it,” he swallows, refusing to look at her, “the light comes on fifty miles before empty, anyway.”

“Hiccup told me about the plea deal,” she tries to sound deadly but with her fists tucked away and her eyes tired, she’s not convinced that she gets the point across. Especially when Eretson pulls up in front of Fishlegs’ house and looks at her with obvious pity, like she’s a kid and he’s about to have to explain that the fish he flushed down the toilet isn’t coming back.

“We can talk tomorrow.” Eretson gestures at the front door of Fishlegs’ house, porch light welcoming even now.

“We can talk now,” she raises an eyebrow, “because I’m not telling Snotlout about this myself.”

“Jorgenson will understand,” he shrinks a little under the statement though and she knows she’s struck a nerve. Good. If Eretson is stupid enough to put the idea of a plea deal in Hiccup’s evasive head, he deserves to look Snotlout in the face and admit it. “He’s a cop.”

“A cop who I haven’t seen put too many innocent people in jail on purpose,” she lets disgust leak into her tone and it’s enough that Eretson turns the car off with an efficient turn of the keys before climbing out of the car and striding ahead of her to the door.

He doesn’t want to look at her right now, and that would make her want to get in his face if it wouldn’t put her expression in full display. She doesn’t want to see her own face until she shoves useless despair back where it belongs, behind a wall of determination.

“Detective Eretson?” Fishlegs answers Eretson’s knock and the other man holds up an almost surrendering hand.

“Eret is fine.”

“Is that like a nickname or something?” Snotlout’s lying back on the couch, tossing a box of tissues up in the air and catching it. He tries to lean up on his elbow, but it must hurt his stitches because he falls back again, the box hitting him in the face. “Because it’s stupid, and I hate it.”

“It’s not a nickname.”

“No, it’s kind of just half your name.” He sits up, using Heather’s shoulder for help even when she tries to shrug him off, obviously invested in the papers she has scattered across the floor.

“How is that not a nickname?” Heather snaps, smacking his hand away from her shoulder. “Isn’t a nickname just a shortened version of someone’s name?”
“Usually their first name, Heather, would you take me seriously if I went by ‘Jorg’?”

“Probably,” she snorts, standing up and handing a piece of research to Astrid, highlighted and attached to a couple of sticky notes. Something about the first canonical Grimborn murder and the despair fights against its cage. “You know, since ‘Jorg’ is just Swedish for ‘George’.”

“Why are you bringing up my name when this guy just announced that his name is Eret Eretson?”

“You brought up your own name.” Fishlegs locks both of the new deadbolts he installed yesterday, his hand awkward on Hiccup’s borrowed drill, and if Astrid doesn’t hit someone soon, she’s going to scream.

“Sixty-eight!” She settles for yelling at Snotlout, brandishing the research she doesn’t want to read like a weapon.

“Why does that go on my tally? Fishlegs was just the one talking—” His eyes widen and he holds his hands up apologetically, “wait no, I’m sorry Astrid. So very sorry.”

The apology is authentic enough to catch her off guard and she almost hits him anyway, for surprising her when she can’t tolerate anymore surprises, but it also gives her a moment to breathe and shrug and pretend she knows how to be reasonable.

“It’s ok,” she bites her lip and gestures at Eretson, who she will not be calling by his first name because even though she lacks the bandwidth to agree with Snotlout right now, his name is stupid. “Eretson has something to tell you.”

“What? Is your middle name ‘Son’?”

“I talked to Hiccup today,” Eretson pulls the conversation back on topic and it’s anything but a relief. Astrid wants to shout that she talked to him too, that he’s stupid and noble and not fine at all, but once again, that wouldn’t help anything. “And introduced the idea of proposing a plea deal to implicate Grisly.”

Snotlout frowns and looks between Astrid and Eretson before speaking slowly, “did he say no?”

“He didn’t say anything,” Eretson shrugs, “I just told him to think about it.”

“Well, that was stupid,” Astrid laughs bitterly, “he doesn’t just think about anything, he obsesses over everything.”

Snotlout and Fishlegs share a knowing look and Astrid raises an eyebrow.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Snotlout drops her question almost too gently, and she’d be suspicious if she had room for anything other than mounting panic at the thought of Hiccup following Eretson’s advice.

“What was that look?”

“There was no look,” Snotlout shrugs, looking back at Eret.

“It’s just that you calling Hiccup obsessive is a little…well, someone mentioned Viggo Grimborn outside your apartment a couple of times and now you’re involved in a copy cat murder investigation.” Fishlegs says gently, if a little condescendingly, and Astrid purses her lips.
“A few times a night, maybe.”

“And I don’t think you’ve been outside in days because you’re researching so frantically, so you calling someone obsessed—”

“Are you done?” She cuts him off and he holds his hands up. “Because I’m trying to talk about the horrifically stupid idea of Hiccup accepting some kind of plea deal.”

“How exactly is it stupid?” Snotlout asks, too gentle, and she blinks at him.

“Because he’s innocent?” Heather answers for her, “and admitting to something that he didn’t do isn’t the smart way to handle this?”

“Plus, think about how it would look when this does go to trial,” Astrid points out and Heather nods in agreement.

“A trial will take months,” Eretson says, too gently, and she hates when the truth doesn’t sound like a point. “Months you have to keep looking, whether he takes the deal or not.”

“Forensics should have enough for dismissal in months,” Astrid’s voice cracks and she forces it even, ignoring worried looks that she doesn’t want, “why do you think Viggo Grimborn wasn’t caught? He wasn’t a criminal mastermind, it’s just that no one could fingerprint him or use a DNA sample.”

“Forensics will be valuable at a trial,” Eretson’s measured voice makes her want to scream, like maybe if she’s loud enough she can force something to happen, “but it’s still about convincing a jury.”

“I wish the news would stop covering it,” Heather mutters and Snotlout shoots her a look before talking.

“What kind of plea would you even be asking for?”

“I was thinking something along the lines of trading information in exchange for a reduced sentence,” Eretson fidgets with his sleeves, pushing them up and letting them fall back down, twitchy at the odds of getting yelled at again.

“So, he trades the ‘insider information’ that Grisly is a sociopathic serial murderer and they ship him off to the nice prison upstate while they investigate,” Snotlout mulls that over for a second, “as much as I hate to say it, that’s not a bad idea.”

“Really?” Eretson flushes and clears his throat, standing up straight like his spine has been replaced by a curtain rod. “I’ve been looking through Grisly’s case notes and I don’t like the idea of him having months to patch up the few holes I’ve found so far.”

“Then what do you do a few months down the road when forensics prove that Hiccup had nothing to do with it?” Astrid hates even entertaining the idea long enough to say it out loud and Heather seems to agree, nodding emphatically. “But there’s a record of him confessing, what happens to that?”

“Unless Grisly planted Hiccup’s hairs all over or something,” Snotlout says, a little desperate, worry leaking through in ways Astrid doesn’t understand. “Either way though, it’s contempt of court or obstruction of justice or something and he can appeal—”

“So, more time in court, more chances for disaster,” she laughs, the thought of further disaster too
heavy and impossible to take seriously, “all to tell a lie that’s going to be overturned by evidence anyway?”

“All to get my couch back,” Fishlegs says quietly after a minute, appearing at Astrid’s side and putting an arm over her shoulders. It’s shepherding as much as comforting and she digs in her heels against being herded.

“You can stay with me,” Heather offers, Astrid never thought she’d consider Heather the only other person with sense.

“You address is on file,” Eretson shakes his head, “it’s not safe while Grisly is still out there—”

“I don’t care,” Astrid shoves Fishlegs’ arm off, unsure how she's the one in the corner when Hiccup is the one in the cell.

“I do,” Snotlout is quiet, almost apologetic as he looks at her, “I’m getting pretty sick of hiding out while the guy trying to kill me gets to think he’s winning.”

“So, Hiccup is supposed to confess to something he didn’t do so you can feel like you’re winning?” Heather snips and Snotlout rolls his eyes.

“Don’t talk to me about what’s best for Hiccup, you ditched him as soon as you disagreed about Vinyl Greenbean—”

“Then why are Astrid and I the only ones who don’t want him to lie during a criminal trial—”

Heather and Snotlout bicker like siblings, the kind of vicious back and forth perfected over years of disagreements, but something about their timing is off, like there’s a hole, a third voice supposed to flit back and forth alongside theirs. Astrid can hear its absence louder than any memory of Hiccup’s voice and the thought makes her swallow hard, clinging to something looking more impossible every second.

What if there’s no way to make this all go away? What if she does have to find some way to move on with her life while trials drag out across weeks or months or years?

She doesn’t want her life back, not while Hiccup isn’t in it. Not while he doesn’t have his.

“Enough,” Eretson cuts across the arguing with a tired, heavy order that everyone takes. Snotlout turns to point at him, irritated, but he stays quiet as Eretson continues. “None of this is going to be decided tonight, it’ll take time to talk through either way, so maybe it’s best to…”

“Hiccup’s already decided,” Astrid glares at Eretson one last time before sitting on the couch and diving into Heather’s nearest pile of research, hoping for some concrete fact large enough to drown out her fears.

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The memo to leave her alone must be delivered to appropriate parties, because she spends the next three days researching in relative privacy. Ruffnut helps, which means she hangs around and talks about nothing in particular, but it’s better than Fishlegs’ quiet worry or Snotlout being a little too nice. Ruffnut is at the archives when Eretson and Heather show up, looking official enough that it sends a thrill of cool fury down her spine.

One of these days, Eretson is going to tell her that Hiccup accepted a plea deal and she’s going to hit him. It’s inevitable and infuriating and it takes everything in her not to wish it would hurry up,
even sarcastically.

She’s not supposed to be the cynical one, there’s supposed to be someone else here to do that.

“What do you want?” She doesn’t so much greet Eretson as warn him.

Eretson glances suspiciously at Ruffnut before talking, “I was hoping—”

“We were hoping.” Heather tries to soften the tone of the situation and Astrid sighs, forcing her expression placid as she waves Eretson on with a falsely casual hand.

“There’s a piece of evidence I’d like your opinion on,” He produces a thumb drive and looks pointedly at Ruffnut again, waiting for her to take the hint.

“Ooh, evidence? I’m in.” She intercepts the hint and runs with it, snatching the drive and plugging it into Astrid’s computer.

“Actually, it’s sensitive,” Heather tries and fails to beat Ruffnut to the mouse and Astrid crosses her arms.

“I trust her with sensitive.”

“You do?” Ruffnut snorts, clicking play before Eretson can stop her.

It’s a grainy, night-vision video of a man in a top hat and a long coat limping fluidly across the street in front of Astrid’s apartment building. In the fifteen seconds shown, the figure never shows his face, instead leaning the hat closer to the camera as he raises a long arm upwards and covers the lens in what Astrid assumes is black spray paint.

The time stamp is for the morning Hiccup got arrested, at 3:28am.

“We know it’s not Hiccup,” Heather placates, and Astrid wipes her palms on her jeans.

“Someone sure tried to make it look like him though,” she sighs, “play it again.”

The second playthrough she tries to ignore the mocking in the swinging limp, the coat that hangs wrong, the arm that moves slowly through a calculated arc. She succeeds enough to notice the hat, fluorescing just enough in the night-vision to make itself unique.

“Look,” she pauses the video, pointing at a splatter of small smudges on the front of the hat forming almost a halo around a larger smudge on the top of it, “what’s that stain?”

“I wondered that too,” Heather tries to take the mouse and Astrid bristles for a second before letting her, “but then I looked into the camera that Gobber put up and apparently it’s some paranormal detection model with a UV mode.”

For the first time, something clicks just next to Grisly’s painted narrative, a single fallen leaf looped into an eddy instead of following the current all the way down.

“How do you know this is his hat?” Eretson asks and Astrid points at the largest faintly glowing stain.
“Toothpaste fluoresces,” she laughs, finally feeling like she might be getting somewhere after eons of dead ends, “that’s—I know I got toothpaste on his hat and the rest…if I had to guess, it’s blowback, from when Grisly shot Snotlout. He must have taken the hat then.”

“So, you’re saying the fact that you can prove it’s Hiccup’s hat…means it’s not him blacking out the camera?” Heather looks at Eretson for corroboration.

“The only proof we have against Grisly is Jorgenson’s testimony,” Eretson shakes his head, “and I don’t want to bring him in yet. What about proof that Hiccup didn’t shoot Jorgenson and take his hat back?”

“You saw him at the hospital,” Astrid tries, the memory of Hiccup strung out and exhausted tugging at heartstrings that must remain double-knotted if she has any chance of being useful through this.

“That won’t hold up in court,” Eretson shakes his head and Astrid wants everyone to leave so she can keep reading and figure out some magical way that this doesn’t go to court.

A way other than a plea deal that resigns Hiccup to being known as a murderer or at least an accomplice. She just needs time and she can fix this. She’s sure there must be a hole somewhere, no one is perfect, least of all Grisly.

“Wait, before the hospital, he was with me,” Ruffnut supplies, crossing her arms.

“What?” Astrid tries to communicate her anger at not being told that little detail earlier with her eyes.

“We were at the condos trying to sneak into Grisly’s office.” She laughs, “we succeeded, and got caught and—oh wow, that’s not a funny story anymore knowing he was coming from shooting Snotlout.”

“How was that ever a funny story?” Astrid doesn’t expect an answer, but Ruffnut, as always, defies expectation.

“It was hilarious, we were like pretending to be married—that’s how I grabbed his ass, remember?”

Of course Astrid remembers, but she never thought the nonsense coming out of Ruff’s mouth and igniting useless little furls of jealousy would ever be pertinent to something this important. She half thought Ruffnut was kidding to urge her into some kind of forward motion, and she didn’t really have a chance to get past half-thinking about the comment.

“Does Grisly know you snuck into his office?” Eretson asks, frustrated that it’s a question he needs to worry about but obviously relieved that he’s no longer obligated to report on its legality.

“He caught me,” Ruffnut shrugs, “but Hiccup got out without Grisly seeing him.”

“There goes that alibi,” Eretson mutters and Astrid tucks her hair behind her ear, trying not to feel defeated in her once sacred role.

“I could—you know, I could go down to the station right now and—”

“I’m saving that,” Eretson says cryptically, a whisper in the mausoleum dedicated to her chances of helping.
“Fine.” She stalks off to the nearly completed Grimborn room and everyone is gone by the time she risks going back to her desk.

When she gets back to Fishlegs’ house and knocks on the front door, Snotlout swears inside, obviously startled, and she’s irritated until he opens the two deadbolts and she sees the relief in his face.

“Sorry.” She doesn’t know what else to say and immediately wishes she’d said nothing.

“It’s fine.” He seems to stuff down what he wants to say, “you’re not Grisly.”

“Guilty,” she tries to joke but it’s not funny and she wonders what Hiccup would say. “About the plea deal—”

“What’s your team?” Snotlout interrupts, introspection wrongly-sized on his face.

“What?”

“I’ve never asked what team you actually support,” he shrugs and she narrows her eyes, “is it the Chiefs? I bet it’s the Chiefs. Vikings fan?—”

“Why?”

“They uh…having a good season?”

“Goodnight,” she stalks past him to the couch and opens the notebook she left on the coffee table, re-reading Hiccup’s notes for the millionth time.

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The next time Eretson and Heather show up at the archives, Astrid tries to ignore him, but curiosity gets the better of her and she acquiesces to his questions with a nod.

“Have you found anything promising?” He asks like he already knows the answer and she flips through Hiccup’s notes to the creased, crumpled picture of the ‘Al, I.’ safe message.

“I did think of something earlier,” she ignores how Heather examines the picture with authentic interest, trying to remember the details of Hiccup’s interrupted tour, even though it hurts, terrified that the memory of his shocked, delighted face under spontaneous hat hair when she took control will fade. “If the whole idea is that Hiccup is mimicking the Grimborn murders, why didn’t he leave a message on the wall? He clearly had paint,” she references the video from earlier in the week, but even she can hear how feeble the idea is.

He didn’t have time to leave a safe message because he got caught. Copycat killers don’t purposefully leave more evidence. She’s grasping and it’s obvious and desperate and she hates the edge of pity in Eretson’s expression as he sighs.

Astrid’s jaded enough by this point to not ask if she can go with him when he leaves. Something tells her the plea deal is more probability than possibility at this point.

Heather stays though, asking to see the Berk Enquirer where Astrid found the ‘Al, I.’ safe message, her hands careful on the wrinkled pages that Hiccup clenched in his fist a world ago, when all of this seemed random. Snotlout and Ruffnut show up not too much later and Ruffnut produces a flask from her purse, setting it purposefully in the middle of the table.
“Antique documents,” Astrid hisses half-heartedly, pulling the pages away and brushing at a drip of nose-burning alcohol on the corner.

“Tuffnut made this,” she drums her fingers on the table, “do we try it? Or is that a really bad idea? Or do we try it because it’s a really bad idea?”

“If we’re trying bad ideas…” Astrid closes the notebook she was reading and the lack of distraction makes the day instantly heavier. “I have a couple others I’d put first.”

Hitting Eretson. Draining her bank account to hire her own lawyer and sue Eretson. Go down to the station and tell all the truths she’s been holding back. Hit Grisly while she’s at it.

“We should try it,” Snotlout rubs his hands together then pauses, “or we could try whatever bad idea Astrid wants to try first, I’m open.”

“Stop,” she glares at him.

“Stop what?”

“Being so nice,” her shudder is involuntary, “it’s not going to make me feel any better about the plea deal. And it’s creepy.”

“It is creepy,” Heather agrees, “it’s like the threat of Astrid hitting you sixty plus times finally taught you humility or something.”

“She can’t,” his wince is exaggerated, “I’d still die. It wouldn’t be any better than handing me over to Grisly.”

“Sounds like that might be easier on you,” Ruffnut laughs, eternally repositioning herself into the audience.

Astrid opens her mouth to say something to Heather but a choked breath is all that comes out as her eyes widen. Easier. Grisly has a plan to make this easier.

“That’s it,” she says quietly, morbid confidence welling behind it, “that’s his out.”

“Hey, don’t actually turn me over to Grisly, just because you don’t like—”

“No,” she shoves the rest of Hiccup’s notes in her bag, “that’s Grisly’s plan. That’s how none of this catches up to him, that’s how forensics doesn’t uncover anything. That’s how he keeps this out of trial, where he’ll obviously lose.”

“What are you talking about?”

“And the deal is going to rush it—”

“Astrid—” Ruffnut goes to stand up, but Heather beats her to it, following Astrid to the archives’ staircase.

“I’ll be back at Fishlegs’ later,” Astrid doesn’t stop Heather from following her, taking a brief chance on the camaraderie born in the fire of all these recent disasters.

“What are you doing?” Heather asks outside, pulling an umbrella out of her bag when a crack of thunder punctuates the conversation.

“I’m going to go see Hiccup.” She feels better saying it out loud. More solid. More effective.
“He doesn’t want you to,” Heather pauses like she’s holding something else back, but Astrid keeps walking, arms crossed against the rain.

“Well I don’t want to sit around joking about him being in jail.” She lets her realization sit for a second, pausing as long as she dares to think about it without throwing off the rest of her juggling rhythm. Being equally annoyed at Snotlout’s story isn’t really a reason to trust Heather, but it’s all Astrid has, and she flicks her a careful, judgmental glance. “I have to warn him. Even if it’s another wild guess—”

“Slow down,” Heather frowns, moving close enough to share her umbrella, “warn him about what?”

Astrid sighs, once again leaning into the uncomfortable truth that she can’t do this alone, “if Grisly is really planning on getting away with framing Hiccup with modern forensics and psychological assessments working against him, he can’t let this go to trial. And at this point, the only way to stop it from going to trial is to make sure there’s no one to try.”

It’s abstract and cluttered and everything she can do to not say ‘kill’.

“How are you planning on getting into the jail?” Heather asks after a silent second, handing Astrid the umbrella to dig through her bag.

“I…hadn’t thought that far.” She curses herself, trying to rein the useless panic back in.

“Snotlout never took his badge back.” Heather hands her an all too familiar shield shaped badge in a thin leather wallet and reaches back into her bag, “or his gun—”

“Why would I need a gun?”

“If you’re right…” She trails off pragmatically and Astrid swallows hard, shaking her head.

“If I’m wrong, I’m breaking enough laws impersonating a police officer. How do you know the badge will work?”

“It’s how I got in last time, there wasn’t even a guard on duty at the side door, I just scanned the badge and went up. He was on the top floor then, in the smallest corner cell.” She produces a keyring and holds it up by a non-descript silver key, “this opened the hallway door.”

“You aren’t going to tell me to stay out of it?” Astrid pauses, the rain on the umbrella punctuating her half thoughts. Maybe she should ask for the gun after all.

“I think it’s your business whether you stay out of it or not.”

It’s either a setup or it’s not. Heather is either with Grisly or not. Astrid either showed her hand or she didn’t, and either way, her next move is the same. Tell Hiccup.

Heather goes back to the archives, or the station, or to Grisly’s office to tell him what’s going on. Astrid doesn’t know and she doesn’t have room to care, not when the last week without seeing Hiccup might be coming to something like an end. A point of punctuation, at least, a new anchor before the next disaster, whatever it will be.

The side door of the county jail opens like the alley door of an office building when Astrid holds the badge against it, and if it weren’t for the Berk Police Department insignia on the wall inside, she could almost believe she was going to a doctor’s appointment or to see an accountant. That illusion shatters though when she looks through the small bulletproof window on the second-floor
landing and sees a line of men in orange jumpsuits walking down the hallway, shepherded by a guard in a gray uniform that sends a shiver up her spine.

She’s never seen a prison guard, their uniforms could be gray for all she knows, but they look too much like NWF for comfort.

The badge works again at the sensor next to the door on the top floor and she slips through, shutting it quietly behind her and not giving herself time to pause or think, because if she did, she might realize what a horrible idea this is. The umbrella in her hand drips a trail of raindrops on the floor as she walks purposefully, trying to project that she knows what she’s doing and she’s supposed to be here as she makes her way to the last door on the left, hoping for the first scrap of luck that she’s had since she found Elizabeth Smith’s apartment.

The key Heather gave her slides easily into the lock, turning with an anticlimactic click, and she slips inside before she can think better of it.

“Astrid?” Hiccup’s voice splits the silence with a stab of shaky confusion, a wall of bars between them dividing his haggard face into three parallel snapshots of shock.

“Hi.” She looks him up and down, making sure he’s real and whole, struggling to hold onto the urgency that propelled her up here on a whim.

“How—”

“Snotlout’s badge,” she shows him before shoving it into her pocket to free up a hand that she rests tentatively on the crossbeam of the cold bars. He hesitates before setting bony, clammy fingers on hers, jaw flexing under the extra week of stubble too obviously, like he’s lost weight he couldn’t afford to lose.

He looks worse than he did through plexiglass and her heart aches.

“Heather…” His expression is resolute, but his eyes are soft, “you shouldn’t be here.”

“Neither should you,” she snaps a little too loud, “and I’m trying to fix it, I’m trying to find something wrong in Grisly’s setup, but I don’t see how to make it fall apart before it goes to trial. Or worse, before you force it into an early plea deal.”

“Trial,” Hiccup’s lips twist into a nauseous smirk and her hand itches to wipe it off. “Grisly seems to think this won’t make it that far.”

“He said that?” Astrid’s blood runs cold and fast, like her veins are an Alaskan rafting course, and Hiccup’s fingers curl absently around her knuckles, thumb brushing hers as he frowns. “And the plea deal would make it happen so much faster, but—did he really say that he wasn’t going to let it go to trial?”

“Something similar,” he shrugs a scrawny shoulder and his frown deepens, “you really shouldn’t be here.”

“The only way that Grisly could avoid a trial would be if there’s no one to try. If the murders stop and the evidence lines up, why would anyone dig deeper? Especially if he got rid of you, that would be easiest for him.” She needs to say ‘kill’, she knows she does, she needs to drag Hiccup along with her on a tour of their macabre reality, but the word sticks in her throat like its determined to choke her. “It’s the only thing that makes sense, it’s the only way any of this fits—”

“I love you.” Hiccup doesn’t stutter or choke or quibble. He looks at her, ghost of a smile
haunting the corner of his mouth as his hand tightens on hers. “You know, just in case you’re right again and I don’t get another chance.”

Her heart skips a beat then makes up for it, and at first, she thinks she imagines the clapping.

It almost sounds like the pounding in her head, a little uneven, emphasis drifting slightly off beat. It could be an echo, a residual from the way her heart is pounding, fear and confusion rattling around her chest.

It could be a symptom of her brain shutting down, until the laugh.

There’s nothing humorous in the sound, nothing alive. It’s half awkward chuckle after dropping a stage prop and half delighted to stumble upon adequate improv partners.

It’s Grisly in the doorway with a knife.

Hiccup’s top-hat is crooked on his head, as out of place as his unpracticed smile, but twice as insulting. He claps again, impersonating some concept of glee, and Astrid’s feet feel glued to the floor.

“You love her?” He laughs, the sound rich like blood, more alive than she’s ever heard him, “I had my suspicions, but I never dreamed I’d see them confirmed.”

“What are you doing here?” Hiccup’s voice is dull and quaking with some deep-set vulnerability that makes Astrid want to protect him.

“Your dutiful lawyer is downstairs negotiating a plea bargain,” Grisly says like he’s delivering bad news, looking down at the knife in his hand with an almost fond smile, “he seems to think that horrible judge might go easier on you if you talk. And maybe it’s true, some people must be a fan of your talking for you to have made it this far.” When he looks back up, his smile is almost peaceful, like he’s nearly at the end of a very long, arduous road. “I’m not one of them.”

“I thought you enjoyed our conversations,” Hiccup angles himself like there’s some impossible way he could shield Astrid even when she’s on the same side of the bars as the madman with a knife, and his eyes scream ‘run’ in a language Astrid doesn’t speak.

“Astrid,” Grisly doesn’t ignore Hiccup’s struggle to protect her as much as he passively enjoys it, like background music amplifying the emotion in a movie scene. “This is long overdue, I was hoping to save you the inconvenience of coming down here by making a house call—”

“Leave her alone!” Hiccup yells, desperate, the walls swallowing most of the volume even as it leaves Astrid’s ears ringing.

There are cameras in the hallway, they surely heard this. They’re surely hearing all of this.

Why didn’t Grisly shut the door? If he shut the door, his audience would shrink dramatically, at least until someone reviewed the tapes later.

It takes her a second to place the delight in his eyes and then it hits her that he didn’t expect to see her here.

“This is better than I could have imagined though,” Grisly laughs the low, polite laugh of someone making an inappropriate joke behind their boss’s back, “I thought Hiccup would get out on bail and I’d catch you two together with that idiot Jorgenson and clean up all my loose ends at once, getting a judge fired in the process.” He sighs, wistful for the plot twist he predicted that didn’t quite work
out, “but this…to find Astrid here right when I came to dispose of you, to hear you admit your feelings not knowing you were about to watch her die…”

Die. The word seems so passive that Astrid can’t imagine it having anything to do with her. Especially with the way Grisly is looking at her like an object, a prop that couldn’t have any life to give to anything other than his dastardly scheme.

And Hiccup is quiet, quiet like he never is, quiet like he’s already given up.

Something her Uncle Finn always used to say flashes through her head, his too serious words for coaching a children’s baseball team taking on new meaning.

Stunned silence is an enemy’s greatest weapon.

When she flips her grip on the umbrella in her hands and swings it hard, it’s more dangerous than Grisly’s knife because he doesn’t expect it. Because he expected her to stand there and quiver or beg or bargain instead of follow the righteous bolt of anger telling her to take this into her own hands.

The center pole of the umbrella hits across the bridge of his nose with a crunch and a clatter as he drops his knife. He moves faster than she thinks he will, batting the umbrella away from his face and fumbling for the blade.

That puts his face at the perfect height to knee him in his already bleeding nose as she tries to straighten out the umbrella to hit him again. The first hit broke it, apparently, and she settles for thrusting the handle against his chest as soon as he tries to stand, the blow knocking him off balance and sending him stumbling back through the still open door.

His back hits the opposite wall and his hat falls off, revealing rumpled white hair that makes the blood gushing from his nose look more vital, like he’s losing something he can’t live without. He tries to stand up and she moves to hit him again, an involuntary noise of disgust leaking out when he flinches away, looking for the exit he hasn’t given anyone else.

The door at the end of the hallway flies open and Eretson appears, gun in hand, flanked by two officers uniformed in standard Berk PD blue.

Astrid drops the umbrella and holds up shaking hands, taking a step back from Grisly’s defeated form and pointing at a camera on the ceiling.

“He…he left the door open, I bet—I bet this is all on film, he wasn’t expecting, well…me.” She looks at the broken umbrella and the stain on the knee of her jeans before glancing back at Grisly’s already swollen features, sharp edges gone soft with loss of sick control. “He confessed.”

“And he trash-talked a judge,” Hiccup adds from behind her, voice meek and hollow, “which I don’t think helps.”

“Usually doesn’t help,” Astrid agrees, heart fluttering too fast as she watches a cop slide handcuffs around Grisly’s wrists. He slumps under the weight of them, nose dripping on the floor as he trudges down the hall, a leashed lion on the way back to his cage.

Eretson doesn’t ask how she got in or how she’s doing or where the knife near the gate of Hiccup’s cell came from. He sighs, either too professional to show his relief or too tired to feel it, before instructing the other officer with him to take them to an interrogation room while he goes to get a copy of the security footage before anyone else can get to it.
When he comes back and announces that a second NWF agent is in custody for trying to erase the footage seconds after Eretson’s download was complete, Astrid feels like she can breathe for the first time since she concerned herself with why Elizabeth Smith stopped.
“What exactly happened?” Snotlout asks, looking more alive than Hiccup feels, leaning his elbows on a surprisingly clean table at what still claims to be Gruff’s bar.

“We’ve told you like ten times,” Hiccup leans his head on his hand, swirling the glass of the clear alcohol he doesn’t really trust and wishing he were somewhere else.

“Since when have you denied an excuse to tell some long-winded story?” Snotlout rolls his eyes and Astrid nods, quietly agreeing even though her eyes are worried.

“It’s not a long story.” Hiccup understands the impulse to celebrate, but given that he’s the one who just got out of jail, shouldn’t he get to dictate what constitutes that celebration? Shouldn’t his so-called friends have realized that his idea of a celebration might be less ‘bar’ and more ‘shower and nap and food that wasn’t squeezed out of a tube by someone with a face tattoo wearing a hairnet’?

“I want to hear it again,” Snotlout clasps his hands together in a pleading, annoying way that makes Hiccup roll his eyes.

“I hit Grisly,” Astrid tries and fails to bite back an almost shy, self-congratulatory smile, “in the face, with an umbrella. I think I broke his nose.”

“I think you broke his nose when you kneed him in the face.” As much as he wants to go home, Hiccup will tell his half of the story all day if it keeps making Astrid smile like that, buoyant in a way he doesn’t think he’s ever seen her. Flashes of it maybe, under his sheets on that night he can’t think of without aching, but never this constant, like the weight she’s had on her shoulders has been banished to a cell where he belongs.

“Right, I hit him with an umbrella, then kneed him in the face, then shoved him into a wall.” She nods, scooting closer on the booth bench when Ruffnut slides in beside her. Her leg is warm against his and her hand is casual on his thigh, thumb tracing the seam of the shitty, too-big jeans they gave him when they took the jumpsuit back. He shivers at the contact, barely resisting the urge to lean his cheek against the top of her head. He doesn’t think she’d stop him or anything, it just feels like something he wants to be private.

Everything about her makes him want to be alone, to have her all to himself instead of sharing her with everyone while he paces an anxious victory lap in his tour de force of keeping his face straight for over a week. As lonely as he was in jail, he doesn’t want to show it yet, not when everything is still so fresh and chaotic and unbelievable. But he wouldn’t have to act around Astrid, couldn’t even choose to. There’s no debate about letting her in because she’s already there, behind his defenses, holding them up even when he crumbles.

“I bet he can pull off the broken nose though,” Ruffnut’s assertion pulls him back into the conversation and he turns slightly to see her better, his arm sliding around Astrid’s shoulders.

“What? Why are you all looking at me like that?”

“He was going to kill us, Ruff, I don’t care what his nose looks like,” Astrid scoffs.

“I’m not saying I care, I’m just saying I don’t mind a guy who looks a little dangerous.”

“Well he is that, if your definition of ‘a little dangerous’ means someone who killed at least four
people, including your cousin, and tried to kill three others.” Hiccup can’t believe the last few months fit in a sentence.

Well. Two sentences. One compound and twisting and the other short and to the point. The very big, life changing point, but it’s a straight three word shot to get there.

Three words that he said, out loud, that Astrid didn’t ever respond to, because a sociopathic soon-to-be punching bag interrupted the moment. And every moment since has been filled with questioning and paperwork and friends who he just doesn’t want to perform for right now when all the tension is melting out of his back and leaving it a sore mess of frayed nerves.

“This is why we didn’t work out, Hiccup,” Ruffnut tuts and shakes her head, patting Hiccup’s hand on Astrid’s shoulder, “you’re too literal.”

“You married Mr. Benson for his money and it’s about time you admit that to yourself. It’s not my fault that we were lying, and I don’t have any money.” Hiccup snorts, glad to talk about something other than jail, even if Grisly’s face flits through the story like he’ll surely do in Hiccup’s nightmares.

“At least I didn’t have to drag out the divorce by milking you for alimony,” Ruff says, “the annulment because you wouldn’t put out is much quicker.”

“Too bad, I know a good lawyer. Maybe I could have ended up with alimony.” Hiccup smiles when Astrid looks up at him, ponytail tickling his arm. “Don’t worry, the marriage was a fraud anyway, I only made Mr. Benson up to launder money.”

“Yeah, and it was just my attempt to burn through Snotlout’s precious friend-group,” Ruffnut laughs as she elbows Astrid in the ribs, “you could be next, babe, I like a girl with a bludgeon.”

“Probably not the day to get under Astrid’s skin, Ruff, she’s not pulling her punches,” Snotlout warns, “I think there’s an umbrella rack by the door.”

“I’ll go hide it,” Ruffnut leaves but Astrid doesn’t move except to lean forward and pluck Hiccup’s glass from his hand, continuing his mindless swirling.

“That’s not entirely true,” Astrid teases Snotlout, eyebrow raised, “I’m currently holding what? Sixty-five punches for a later date.”

“Sixty-eight,” he corrects, unusually solemn. “Precisely, I could check Heather’s tally, if you want —”

“That’s fine, I guess I’ll trust you.” She takes a sip of Hiccup’s drink before turning to look at him, “do you not trust Tuffnut’s sudden moonshine making abilities?” She asks, mischievous enough to offset the tired circles under her eyes.

“I’m confused enough about today without the help of any mind-altering substances.” He’s struck again with the urge to leave, to go somewhere quiet where things make sense and he can hug her until the room stops spinning. Maybe longer, if she doesn’t have anywhere to be.

“What part are you confused about?” Snotlout’s eyes brighten. “Because we could go through it again, piece it together, I’d be happy to help.”

“You just want to hear about how I hit Grisly again.” Astrid’s fake flippant tone fails when she smiles, victorious like the night she took over his tour, his too big hat tipped sideways on her head.
“What would happen to my psych profile if I admitted that it was kind of hot?” Hiccup’s filter slips ever so slightly, exhausted from its constant engagement, and Astrid shakes her head and laughs, looking at him like she’s wondering if he hit his head.

“Nothing good,” a tired British voice answers and Eretson appears, sitting heavily on the booth bench beside Snotlout and setting a familiar hat on the table, “don’t worry though, it’s shredded. Grisly did his best to clean up before he went to see you.”

“Is that…” Hiccup reaches for the hat but pauses, remembering the last place he saw it and curling his hand into a fist. “Isn’t it evidence?”

“Even Berk PD doesn’t need it with the way Grisly’s talking,” Eretson takes Snotlout’s glass and pounds it back in one long gulp. He’s not wearing his usual tie and his sleeves are pushed up, and Hiccup wonders if he’s finally going to catch a glimpse of the man off duty.

“Hey!” Snotlout protests but Eretson ignores him, pointing at Hiccup’s barely touched drink in Astrid’s hand.

“Um, be my guest.”

“Why is it that serial killers always want to tell you what they do to the bodies?” Eretson asks the room at large before taking a slightly more measured sip. “It’s never good.”

Hiccup is almost as shocked by the authenticity of his laugh as Astrid is, pulling away from his side enough to look up at him with obvious relief, “What? No stories of respectful funeral services? I always pictured Grisly as a ‘be the undertaker you wish to see in the world’ type.”

“We’re just ignoring the fact that Eret stole evidence? If that’s even your real name,” Snotlout narrows his eyes and Eretson does his best to ignore him, nudging the hat in Hiccup’s direction.

“I thought you might want it back, seems like it has history.”

“A gory history,” Hiccup frowns but Astrid takes the hat carefully by its brim and slides it to him.

“Well, so do we.” She nudges him with her elbow and everyone else’s eyes bore into him like more invasive searches while ‘I love you’ pounds on the gate, hatching another escape plan.

“You’re right. Again.” He clears his throat and if she gets the reference, she doesn’t show it, “I’ll get it disinfected. And dry cleaned. And sterilized.”

“You know, I think I spent all this time being jealous of you because you’re tall and a detective and you have abs and talk like you’re on Downton Abbey, but you’ve actually just been a klepto waiting to steal evidence.” Snotlout laughs to himself, sitting up a little straighter.

“And to think, if you hadn’t gotten shot, I’d still be following the rules.”

“You’re blaming me?” Snotlout looks at Eretson a too long second, his eyes darting down to the open button where the other man’s tie usually is. “Well that’s typical.”

“Can I steal you another drink?” Eretson picks up both empty glasses and Snotlout crosses his arms, suddenly flustered.

“Uh yeah, you better, since you drank my other one.” He brushes Eretson off and then calls after him, “also, you can’t steal them, they’re free because the bartender is an idiot.”
“I prefer guru!” Tuffnut jumps away from the still, which is suddenly emitting an alarming amount of steam, “or alchemist.”

“It’s really just a chemical reaction…” Fishlegs explains as he pours a jar into the two glasses.

Everyone else is having fun. Maybe they wouldn’t notice if Hiccup just slipped out and looked into whether he could bribe an Uber Eats driver to deliver the food directly to his bedroom door. It’s not like there’s a serial killer out there anymore, Berk isn’t exactly California in the seventies. Grisly was a rare occurrence.

“I’ll get the fire extinguisher,” Tuffnut disappears into the back room and Fishlegs walks over to lean on the edge of the table, thinking for a second before holding out his hand.

Hiccup stares at it before shaking it, awkward with the realization that he was so used to being surrounded by fellow inmates and guards who hated him that he forgot that Fishlegs’ dislike was an exception.

“Not to be a downer,” Fishlegs starts and Astrid glares at him.

“Then don’t.”

“I’m just wondering what comes next,” he looks at Astrid like a worried older brother she didn’t ask for, moustache radiating concern, “a trial for impersonating a police officer to break into a jail.” He flicks the side of Hiccup’s hat and his tone turns judgmental, “a tour of the compiled murderous history of the city.”

“No, I—I’ve had enough murder for multiple lifetimes,” Hiccup insists, wondering randomly if anyone has ever told Fishlegs that he has the uncanny aura of a high school guidance counselor.

Hiccup’s high school guidance counselor didn’t like him either. He should be glad that Fishlegs doesn’t get to see his shredded psych evaluation.

“And no one talked to me about the off-label badge use,” Astrid shrugs at Eretson when he sits back down, “they seemed pretty happy to get us out of there, honestly.”

“That’s an understatement,” Eretson’s chuckle is cynical, free of any veneer, “they spent all their quarterly budget hiring civilian security guards and their serial killing commander, they couldn’t afford for you to sue them.”

“I can’t afford to sue them,” Hiccup waves off what he assumes is Eretson’s offer as soon as he opens his mouth, “mentally. I can’t believe that somehow this is over, but I need it to be over. I know I’ll have to be a witness later but I just…”

Running out of words is an uncomfortable feeling that he has no interest in getting used to. It’s not even that he’s out of words, he can see himself finishing the sentence in his head and the end of it adds nothing. It’s nothing he hasn’t said before, it’s nothing he’s not communicating now with his slumped shoulders and surely exhausted expression.

Astrid finds his hand and squeezes it, “I think it’s fitting. Sometimes modern bureaucratic problems require medieval solutions.”

He loves her. Those are words he wants to say a thousand times and he doesn’t doubt that every time he does, they’ll mean something different. More. Building on each other in ways he doesn’t even understand yet.
“While there is evidence of umbrellas existing prior to the middle ages, the steel ribbed model that did so much damage wasn’t invented until the seventeen-hundreds at the earliest,” Fishlegs says it like a joke and Snotlout groans.

“I can’t do it, I can’t spend anymore time with nerds.” He catches himself, “not that Astrid is a nerd. I’m only calling Fishlegs a nerd, for the tally.”

“I would have used a sword if I had one,” Astrid thinks seriously on the problem for a second, forehead furrowed as she taps her finger on her chin, “a battle axe, maybe.”

“I think a sword is customary for the knight in shining armor rescuing the damsel in distress from the tower,” Eretson smirks and takes a self-congratulatory sip of his drink when Hiccup’s mouth falls open.

“Now, you decide to be funny? I tried to get you to lighten up for days while I was in jail, but now that everything is miraculously going to be ok, you reveal that you’re funny?” Hiccup shakes his head, “Snotlout, maybe you were right about this guy.”

“Right that he’s an asshole or right that he’s a tall detective with abs who talks like he’s on Downton Abbey?” Snotlout checks and Eretson can’t quite hide his blush this time, which only makes Snotlout smile wider.

“First one.”

“You’ve been Princess Hiccup for two seconds and you’re already making decrees that people are assholes,” Snotlout grins at the new nickname and Hiccup wants to hide under the table, “that took no time at all to go to your head.”

“When you’re a princess, you have to cling to the power that you can,” Hiccup tightens his arm around Astrid, resolving to take her with him if the urge to flee entirely overwhelms, “now I’ve got to hope that my knight in shining armor doesn’t lock me in another tower to ravish me, or something.”

“My tower,” Astrid’s face falls, eyes suddenly wide and serious as she folds her hands on the table, expression frozen like she just got very bad news.

“I mean you don’t have to ravish me, if you don’t want, I was just pointing out that I’m not familiar with the existence of any Distressed Damsel consent laws or—”

“I can’t lock you in a tower because someone got murdered at my apartment. Shit. I was so focused on,” she waves at him in a distracted, distressed way, “that I forgot I don’t have anywhere to live that’s not a recent crime scene. I bet my stuff is covered in blood—”

“It is.” Hiccup mumbles, wincing at the memory.

“I’m never going to get my deposit back.” She leans her head on her hands and Hiccup rubs the sudden, stressed knot in her shoulder.

“I’ll talk to Gobber for you.”

“You can move in with us,” Snotlout offers, too blunt to be anything but sincere. Almost annoyed, like he’s frustrated that he has to be the one to suggest such obvious things.

“What?” Hiccup and Astrid ask simultaneously and Fishlegs coughs.
“I mean if you still need my guest room—”

“She doesn’t need the guest room, Fishface,” Snotlout brushes him off, “she can move in with us. We have a three-bedroom place, if she doesn’t want to stay with Hiccup, he can sleep on his weird desk.” He elbows Eretson to bring him into a joke, “she’d probably join him though—”

“Sixty-nine!” Astrid shouts, face red and glare sharper than the sword she wished for.

“Do you need the pants back?” Tuffnut asks from the back room and Snotlout snickers. Hiccup’s whiplash is feeling more and more like a stroke.

“I wasn’t asking for details…”

“No, I’m going to hit you sixty-nine times—you planned that.” She crosses her arms, “that’s why you were so nice—that’s why you asked me about football—”

“Yeah,” he holds his hand up to Eretson for a high five and Astrid clears her throat. “The Pats are the best, by the way. God, not saying that was so hard, but worth it.”

“If you’re good enough for high fives, I can probably start knocking that tally down…” She rolls up her sleeves and threatens and Hiccup remembers waking up with his head on Astrid’s lap, casual banter bouncing around and making the hospital room feel like home.

And he loves her, and it’d be perfect in a way that could almost make up for everything that’s happened. And he loves her, and she didn’t have a chance to respond.

“Can I talk to you for a second?” He blurts at Snotlout and points behind him towards the front door, “alone?”

“Why can’t she move in with us? I love her.” He says it so easily and Hiccup feels like his eyes might bug out of his head.

“Now? Can I talk to you alone, now?”

Something about his tone, probably the fact he sounds crazy, keeps anyone from saying anything as they all unload from the booth to let him and Snotlout out. The cool evening breeze is wonderful against the back of Hiccup’s neck, even now when he’s in the middle of freaking out, and he takes a deep breath, trying to let the freedom quell the panic.

“What’s your problem?” Snotlout throws his arms up and Hiccup glares at him.

“What’s my problem?” He shakes his head, “you can’t just ask my—” Girlfriend? They haven’t agreed on that. Savior? As much as he wants her to ravish him, he’s not actually her princess and this is the twenty-first century. Reason he’s alive? That’s doesn’t have anything to do with their living situation. “You can’t just ask Astrid to move in with you like—”

“Us, I said us,” Snotlout corrects.

“That’s supposed to be my job and I would have asked you first and—”

“Do you not want her to?” Snotlout frowns, holding his hands up in a tentative surrender, “dude, I legitimately thought it was going that direction, you can’t go two seconds without staring at her with stupid lovey-dovey eyes, so I just figured—”

“I want her to. I—more than—I was thinking about it before the whole jail thing but—” He
exhales, letting himself remember that morning, how right it felt, “and you can’t just go around
telling her that you love her—”

“Uh, I do love her, cuz,” Snotlout points at his shoulder, “some creepy asshole tried to kill me, and
she broke his face. And she saved your idiot life in the process.” He backhands Hiccup’s chest a
little too hard and Hiccup realizes he hasn’t even considered that Snotlout might feel the same
about losing him as he did about losing Snotlout, “so yeah, I kind of love her. I think she should
probably get a medal or a plaque or something.”

Hiccup sighs and rubs his hand over his face, “I love you too. And I love her—”

“Different ways, I hope.”

“Couldn’t be more different.” He tries to shove his jumbled brain into some kind of order, before
the door opens behind Snotlout and Astrid steps out, halfway through putting his borrowed jacket
on.

She’s wearing his hat.

“Tuff helped me spray it down with one-hundred-eighty-seven proof alcohol. The inside too. I
think that counts as disinfecting it.”

“Good.” He swallows hard, wondering for the thousandth time today if he’s dreaming and he’s
going to wake up uncomfortable on that cot in his cell. Or worse, wake up at four in the afternoon
at home, only to realize that none of this happened and he never met her.

“Do you want to get out of here?” She asks, magical words in her magic voice, laced with that
magic understanding she seems to have of his brain and soul, and he nods so fast that his back
twinges.

“I’ll see you at home,” Snotlout points at Astrid, “and maybe you also, potential roomie, guard my
boy on the way there?”

“That was the plan,” her lips twitch, “I’ll have to do without my umbrella, but I think I’ll manage.”

“You don’t have to decide now,” Hiccup placates as soon as Snotlout is back inside, but Astrid
seems relatively unperturbed. Maybe after all of this, she’s just imperturbable.

He wishes he felt that way. At all. He feels like he could be disrupted by an unexpected pebble in
his path.

“Where to?” She takes a couple of backwards steps ahead of him, like she’s giving him a tour that
makes him use fresh eyes to take in a street he’s seen a hundred times before.

Home. He wants to go home. He wants his bed and his sheets and her and he wants it to be her
home too. It won’t feel like home without her and he loves her, and he needs to make sure she
knows that before he makes any plans.

If he has another serious conversation today, he’ll scream.

“I don’t know.” He shoves his hands in too big pockets, Fishlegs’ question rattling around his
head. What comes next?

It was easy to think about the next few months when they’d been taken from him, but now, looking
at Astrid starting some tour to the future wearing their past on her head, ears sticking out under the
weight of the brim, he can’t make himself focus on anything but her. Even if he’s lost, he’s not
adrift, because his anchor is safely held in her competent, decisive grip.

“You seemed a little…antsy in there.”

“You caught that, huh?”

“Do you want to talk about it?” She falls back into step beside him, looking up from under the
black brim with endlessly deep blue eyes and his heart thuds out of rhythm.

“No, not at all.” He runs his hand through his hair and can smell the anti-septic of cheap jail
shampoo. “I want a shower and I’m so tired that I want a nap, but I’m way too keyed up to take
one. I really want pizza, but I don’t want to have to talk to anyone to get it. I want to be alone, but
I want you to be there—” He pulls up short, “Princess Hiccup is demanding, apparently.”

“Not particularly,” she grabs his hand to get him walking again, her fingers warm steel and
comfort, “your place then. I think that the people making minimum wage at Pizza Hut wouldn’t
be too happy if you showered in the sink while not talking to them.”

His place. Like she’s willing to be there, like she understands how he needs to be alone, but he’d
be miserable if she wasn’t there. Even if she is there, it still counts as being alone, and he’s never
felt like that about anyone.

“Astrid,...” There’s so much he wants to say and so much he wants to say later, so he settles on a
question, squeezing her hand so she’ll look at him. “How does Snotlout know about um, well, my
desk?”

“Well,” she starts, then her face falls, instantly distraught in a way he knows instinctively means
that Grisly flitted across her thoughts.

“I’m sorry—”

“It’s a valid question—”

“I wish I hadn’t asked,” he rubs his face again, “or I wish I hadn’t asked now, because I’ve been in
jail and I don’t want to think about it, or about what I missed, or about what happened. Not right
now.”

“I don’t want to think about how Snotlout knows about your desk.” She wrinkles her nose,
flushing when she says ‘desk’ and he doesn’t think about it, his feet follow a path that goes with
the hat, dragging her with him into an alley between two planes of century old brick. “What are
you doing?”

“Shortcut.”

“Wait,” she stops just within the shadow of the buildings, yanking on his arm with all that
unexpected strength, and when he turns around, she’s astonished and half smiling.

“What?” The hat is crooked, and he can’t be conflicted how he feels about it when she’s laughing
and pressing an intentional finger against his chest.

“You almost went to jail for being the Grimborn copycat, but you’re not—”

“I know that,” he catches the hand she’s poking him with, folding in her pointer finger before
kissing her knuckles.
“You’re the prostitute.”

“You lost me.”

“If Grisly was the Grimborn copycat, and you’re the one lured into dark creepy alleys for the promise of a few bucks to pay your bills, then you aren’t the damsel in distress, you’re the prostitute taken advantage of by the dastardly fiend.” She whispers the last few words and it’s perfect, it’s Grisly reduced to an anecdote or a setup.

“What does that make you?” He lets go of her hand to brush her hair behind her ear, and he hasn’t kissed her because of cops and audiences and neither of those are here now, in an alley so like the one where she first stood on a grate and refused to enjoy his tour. “No, no, I’ve got it. You solved it.”

“Solved what?” She cocks her head, cheek pressing into his palm, and his other hand finds her waist as her back meets the wall and the hat tips forward over her eyes. She takes it off and sets it in place on his head, nudging it straight with a satisfied smile as his thumb drags across the corner of her mouth. “Please get to the point.”

She relaxes when he kisses her, arms wrapping around his neck, simple and charged when his knuckles scrape against kiln-fired brick. It’s the right kind of distraction, the jumble in his head pushed aside for something better and more important. More permanent.

“You solved Grimborn,” he mumbles against her cheek, kissing down her jaw and shuddering when her warm hand slides under the back of his itchy prison lost and found tee-shirt.

“What?” She pushes him back an inch with a hand on his chest and frowns, eyes too focused behind the daze. When he tries to kiss her again, she repeats the question, eyes flicking to his hat as she hooks her heel around his.

“As you said, I’m the prostitute, easily lured and cornered. You caught the murderer.” He’s too close not to kiss her again, especially when the brim of his hat nudges against her forehead and she smiles, momentarily content in the victory. It’s about time this happened in one of the alleys that still center him, even when the Grimborn lure is dissolved. “You solved it.”

“I didn’t….” She trails off when he runs a hand down her thigh, tugging it against his as he kisses her pulse, “it’s not solving—”

“It’s good enough for me,” he pulls back enough to brush his nose across hers before meeting her eyes, the weight of the last serious thing he can’t ignore sitting heavy in his chest, “your apartment sucked.”

“What?”

“Condo of eighteen-eighty-three, mass-produced, no character, remodeled by a renegade arcade enthusiast on a budget in the early nineties,” he pauses to rebuild his drive, lips pressed against hers as his hand cradles the back of her head, “my place on the other hand…” He gets distracted by soft hair tickling his forehead and the way her fingers curl in his hair, displacing the hat, “original hardwood floors. Towel warmer. Crown molding.”

“Are you asking me to move in with you?” She rakes her fingernails through is beard when she gets him far enough away to read his face. She has hat-head.

He can’t breathe.
“I meant what I said,” he swallows, “in jail before—I love you.”

The weight off his chest lands on his foot and he freezes, feeling her heavy breathing against his front and her fingers frozen in his hair at the nape of his neck.

“It’s too soon.” She says it like she’s reading it off of a quiz on a website that didn’t give her the answer she wanted. “You can’t say that this soon.”

“I just did,” he tries to smile, “what rule am I breaking this time?”

His experience in evading conviction makes him hope it’s closer to trespassing than murder.

“You don’t know?” She tries for chastising but it’s hard to take her seriously when her warm hand finds his side as she stands up straight, putting some space between her back and the wall even if she doesn’t expand the space between them. “You don’t ask someone to move in with you after what? One date?”

“Wait, all those times you saved my life or my sanity don’t count as dates?” He fakes shock, taking her hand and starting towards his apartment again.

“I’ve saved your life once,” she allows, bumping her shoulder against his, “doesn’t exactly increase the total that much.”

“Oh no, you’ve saved it at least twice, probably more. What do you think would have happened to me if you weren’t there when Fishlegs caught me with a broken copier for a second time?”

“You wouldn’t have broken the copier without my help.”

“You don’t know that.” He pulls her onto the sidewalk through a small gap around a dumpster, his front door half a block down the road pulling him towards it like a gravitational beacon. Shower. Astrid. Food. Astrid. Bed. Astrid. “You don’t have to decide now, I just…wanted you to know how I felt about it.”

“Which, just to make sure we’re on the same page, you feel that I’m personally offending you by living in a place without crown molding.” She jokes even as her eyes scan his face, probably looking for some sign that he’s offended by her response, as impossible as that would be with her holding his hand. “I feel like…it’s too soon but if you can afford it on your meager prostitution income, I could definitely afford it.”

“That’s how it is?” He laughs, refusing to let go of her as his key slides into the front door and turns with a click that resonates in his bones. “You’re not wrong, but do you have to rub it in now?”

“And I feel like if I look away from you for a second, you’re going to disappear, and I don’t even want to think about going through that again.”

“I don’t want to think either,” he opens the second door and his dad’s old, dusty chair greets him like an envoy promising safety. When Astrid locks the door, he can breathe again fully, the quiet making room for him to feel how empty his chest has been, how his hands burn when he looks at her. “I don’t know the rules behind the knight locking the damsel back in their own tower.”

“Already looking for more rules to break?” She takes the hat off of his head and hangs it on the rack by the door, exactly where it goes, like she’s belonged here all along.

“Mostly wondering who retains ravishing privileges in this situation,” he helps her shrug out of his
borrowed jacket and tosses it onto the couch, clutter the last thing on his mind.

“Where does that even fit in the shower, nap, not nap, pizza schedule?”

“Now,” his voice surprises him, deeper than he expected, and he clears his throat as he pulls her to him, hands sliding down to her hips, “ideally, if you think we can squeeze it in.”

“Are you on a tight schedule I don’t know about?” She wraps her arms around his neck and kisses his cheek, cocking her head when he nods.

Before, when a package sent him skidding off kilter, he wasn’t ready to move forward, to clutch at the happiness he could instead of dwelling on the possible bad. But holding on so tight is what got him in trouble, it’s what led him further and further into someone’s trap, away from the path he wants to be on. He could talk all night about the last week in hell, but it wouldn’t make him feel better the way that taking a break from the obstacle course inside his head would.

“Very tight schedule,” he starts walking backwards, tripping over the edge of the rug and catching himself on the arm of the couch. “Might have to multi-task.”

“Hiccup,” she laughs, taking a step away from him to rely on her own obviously better balance, “it’s been a long day—”

“It’s been a long week, stuck in my head all day with all my worst-case scenarios.” He continues to pull her with him towards the bathroom, “right now I just want you to help me stop smelling like jail and to start out this new leaf on the right foot.”

“How else would you do it?” She relaxes, all trepidation gone as she tugs his too big, itchy shirt up his chest, getting it over his head as he fumbles the door open.

“Funny—”

She cuts off his not quite complaint with a kiss, her hands dragging up and down his chest in a pattern like she’s assessing him for damage. Her fingers practically shock him with warmth after so long in practical isolation and he pulls her shirt up, sighing at more of her skin against his. She laughs into his mouth as she tugs on the waistband of his jeans against the cheap belt bunching them across his hips.

“Whose pants did you steal?”

“It was all they had,” he takes off his own belt and the oversized pants fall to his knees before he realizes he’s still in his shoes and sits back on the toilet to deal with his leg.

“I figured you’d be done with communal showers,” she locks the bathroom door before taking her own shoes off and stripping easily, curious eyes flicking only once to the red marks on his shin when his leg drops to the floor.

“I’m not really ready to take my eyes off you either,” he shrugs, grinning when the words make her blush even as she looks around the bathroom, efficient even in her embarrassment.

“How do we do this?” She asks after a second, gesturing simply at his leg as she opens the shower door and turns on the water, steam billowing towards the ceiling.

“The bench should work.” He doesn’t know where his crutch is, doesn’t know anything except it feels right when she touches him, fingers sure against his back as she helps him to the bench and sits unceremoniously across his lap.
And seeing her through bars and across fraught tables covered in paperwork, after being surrounded by their friends and curbed by outside world, she’s finally close enough to feel real. She kisses him, combing her fingers through his hair and letting the shower water soak into it as he pulls her impossibly closer, one hand on her hip and the other sliding up her stomach to trace the curve under her breast.

She shivers even though the water is on the cusp of too hot and he hums into the kiss before breaking it, mumbling against her wet jaw.

“Something’s different.”

“You’ve had even less sleep this time?” She swipes a gentle thumb under his eye and stands just long enough to straddle him, knees squeezing his hips as his back slips down slightly against the wet wall.

“That’s not it,” he groans when she grinds against him, hand darting down to wrap around him. And after so long in his head, ignoring uncomfortable situations to the best of his ability, it’s almost too much, his head falling back against the tile as his fingers dig into her hips.

“Is this it?” She kisses his neck, hand moving slowly, teeth grazing his earlobe when he catches her wrist to stop her. “I thought you were in a hurry,” she teases, breath hitching when he slides his hand around to her inner thigh, fingers brushing between her legs.

“No, it’s just that I don’t have any old books in my bathroom for you.” He kisses down to her collarbone as he touches her, and her sound of exasperation is half-hearted as she clings to his shoulders. “Can we still do this, or do I need to install a humidity-controlled bookcase under the sink?”

“The respect for climate control,” she stutters, biting her lip when his finger slips inside, “is kind of hot.”

“Yeah?” He laughs into her neck, pulling her closer with a hand between her shoulder-blades and adding a second finger to the first. “Oh wait, that’s not true either, there’s a soggy magazine in here somewhere to read when my phone dies.”

“What magazine?” She asks, grinding down against his fingers, breath cool on his forehead.

“Highlights.” He twists his fingers, thumb searching for her clit.

“That works.” She moans under her breath when he finds it and he focuses on the sound to keep from shaking, this much good after all that bad making him lightheaded.

“I already did the maze though.”

“No,” she fakes miserable as best she can while rocking against his hand, fingers wrapping around him again and stroking, “that ruins it.”

The door rattles and they both jump, his arms wrapping around her back and pulling her as close as he can, like he could somehow protect her, one-legged and tractionless. As if she needs his protection, she’d probably bludgeon the intruder with the toilet tank lid, or something, and he’d be stuck helpless again.

“Oh, are you guys in there?” Snotlout’s voice is muffled through the door and Astrid hides in Hiccup’s shoulder, arms crossed self-conscious across her chest.
“Uh, can you go away?” Hiccup tries, rubbing her back and repositioning in an attempt to wake up an ass-cheek that he hadn’t realized had fallen asleep.

“It’s just you?” Snotlout yanks at the door again, “let me in, I have to pee.”

“No?” It comes out as a question and he clears his throat, trying again as Astrid shifts, the water suddenly hitting his thigh instead of her back. “No.”

“Come on, I just have to pee, I’ll pee in the sink—”

“If you’re planning on peeing in the sink, just pee in the kitchen sink,” Hiccup growls back and Astrid sits up straight, hands on his shoulders for stability as she looks disgusted between him and the door.

“No! Just hold it, no one is peeing in any sink!”

“Astrid’s in there?” Snotlout snickers, but she’s too indignant to be embarrassed now, eyes on fire as she responds.

“I’m moving in with people who pee in the sink?”

“It all goes down the same drain,” Snotlout’s justification barely registers as Hiccup looks wide-eyed at her.

“You’re moving in?” He whispers, not trusting the words to be louder.

“You offered,” she pushes a strand of wet hair away from her face and he kisses her, hands on her face, fingers curling in wet hair and holding her close.

Snotlout says something he doesn’t hear, an unwelcome grunt from an outside world he doesn’t care about and he breaks the kiss just long enough to bark back.

“Go away!”

“He’s going to pee in the kitchen sink,” Astrid grimaces and he kisses her wrinkled nose, heart thudding.

“I don’t care.”

“I—”

“Move in,” he rests his forehead against hers, “please. Just—please, I will never pee in the sink. I swear on my life, which I already owe to you. I promise.”

“But Snotlout—”

“Don’t talk about Snotlout right now,” he touches every part of her he can reach, memorizing her again, this time knowing he doesn’t have to let her go, “please, I have to focus on giving you another reason to move in.”

“Another?” She looks at him like he’s a reason, like he’s reason enough, and it feels like he’s going to burst out of his skin.

“Besides the old books,” he kisses her chin, “and the hat.” And the lack of on-site murders. “And the crown molding.”
She slicks his hair back from his face, “and you.”

“And me.”

“I’m convinced.”
“You were short on rent. Again,” Snotlout leans against the doorframe of Hiccup and Astrid’s shared bedroom, arms crossed, and Astrid rolls her eyes, pausing halfway through trying to tie Hiccup’s tie to answer him.

“No, I’m not, I told you I’m not paying for half of your NFL package.”

“You watch it too!” He insists and she pats Hiccup on the chest, wordlessly assuring him that she’ll be back focused on his nervous expression soon.

“That’s because you sit on the remote,” she reminds him, “I’m not paying for it.”

“You look like an adult,” Snotlout changes the subject, gesturing to Hiccup’s new khakis and dress shirt under a borrowed blazer. The tie is proving more difficult, but she’ll figure it out. “Where’d you get the jacket?”

“Astrid,” he says, voice pinched as he adjusts the sleeves, looking over her shoulder into the mirror she’d salvaged from her apartment that’s still propped against her bookcase, which is stocked with the overflow that wouldn’t fit in the office when they combined libraries. He touches his hair and a piece at the back pops straight out.

“Why did Astrid have a men’s blazer?” Snotlout laughs, “unless it’s a woman’s—”

“Tuff and I are the same size, ok?” She glares at him, “shut the door on your way out. Please.” She adds the last word to make it happen faster, even if her voice isn’t polite enough to let it carry any weight.

“Quickie before the interview—”

“Shut the door.” She smiles, patronizing and not letting it reach her eyes, “or you’ll see something you don’t want to see.”

“Guess it’s my last chance to say good luck,” Snotlout directs that at Hiccup, “you’re going to kill it—”

“Snotlout!” Astrid takes a pillow off of the bed and throws it at him, hitting him squarely in the face, “shut the damn door!”

“I’m keeping the pillow until I get the twenty bucks,” Snotlout waves the pillow that he barely caught in the air before shutting the door, mouthing ‘good luck’ at Hiccup through the gap.

“Then I’ll buy a new pillow,” Astrid doesn’t care if he heard her last dig and she refocuses on Hiccup, adjusting the untied tie under his collar, “he’s right, you’re going to do great.”

He smiles, cheeks tight under the beard that’s thankfully finally filling out, especially since he decided he’s determined to keep it during his job search. She gets his motive and is frankly a little jealous that he can stop shaving and suddenly he won’t look like the suspect whose picture spent weeks all over the news while she’s stuck with a baseball cap and a glare to not look like the student temporarily presumed missing in association with the same case. He’s lucky that it’s starting to look good, official, aging him a few years in a way that makes his green eyes more vulnerable as he catches her hands, tugging them away from the tie she’s been tangling more than knotting.
“I look like I’m wearing a costume,” he gestures at himself and she tilts his chin down to force eye contact.

“Aren’t you?” She points at the top hat hanging on the side post of the headboard with her chin, “you aren’t exactly in your natural state.”

“I knew I should have rented a tux,” he jokes, voice shaky along its edges, almost fluttering, “gone full white tie with the hat and a monocle.”

“Maybe I’d have better luck tying a white tie.”

“It’s fine,” he pulls the tie off entirely, throwing it on the bed and running a frustrated hand through the hair they just got done trying to comb. He instantly looks more like himself and she sighs, unbuttoning the top button of his shirt.

“You’re right, it’s the historical society, not a bank.”

“Yeah, at least a bank would have to google my name to learn about that time I was framed for murder, I’m sure everyone at the historical society was following the case independently.” He laughs, sitting on the edge of the bed, face in his hands. “Thousands of blogs and websites and comment threads with advice about how to dress for an interview and how to introduce yourself, but there’s not a single Buzzfeed list about how to conduct yourself after being wrongly and publicly accused of serial murder? That seems like an irresponsible knowledge gap.”

“Maybe you can write something up,” she sits down next to him, wishing there was something real she could do to help. “Look, Hiccup, they wouldn’t have scheduled an interview if they didn’t think you could do the job.”

“Or maybe they just want gory details,” he says before groaning, sitting up straight and squinting his eyes shut for a second, “you’re right. I know you’re right. Somehow filling in the non-existent work experience on my resume with claims that I’m a self-starter and quick-learner made them call me.”

“I think it had more to do with the cover letter,” she rolls her eyes, out of gentle reminders after a week of his mounting anxiety, “I don’t think most applicants make a case for a building to be declared historically significant before they’ve even been interviewed.”

“Gruff’s should be preserved,” he insists, “especially since Tuff took out the drop ceiling and found that art deco pressed tin—”

“Hiccup.”

“And not only is it one of the last authentic speakeasies we have left, since they tore down the building on third, and even there the drug store using the space tiled over the original wallpaper—”

She kisses him to cut him off, laughing and wrapping her arms around his neck when he keeps trying to make his point, mumbling about hidden cabinets against her lips. It takes a minute, but he relaxes with a sigh, hand sliding to her lower back to pull her closer, thumb dragging slow and sweet against her spine. His muffled sound of disappointment when she tries to pull back keeps her there another second, dropping two soft pecks on his lips before anchoring him with her hands on his cheeks and looking seriously into his eyes.

“Save it for your interview, ok?”

“Save the kissing for my interview?” He grins, lopsided and relaxed, at least momentarily. “I
thought I was moving on from my sordid past, prostituting myself in the alleys for a few bucks.”

“Save your lectures on old buildings for your interview,” she kisses his forehead and stands up, offering him her hand and pulling him to his feet, “I can’t think of any audience more primed to hear them than the Berk Historical Society.”

“You know, Tuff did manage to turn a profit this month,” Hiccup’s eyes flicker unsure, “bartending is a viable trade, it’s going to be around as long as people numb their feelings with alcohol.”

“But historically significant buildings won’t if someone doesn’t start advocating for their wallpaper,” she reminds him why the job appealed to him in the first place and he sighs.

“And if they just want to talk about Grimborn?” He refers to the original killer but points to recent memory with his tone and she thinks for a second before picking up the hat and offering it to him.

“Give them a tour. Prove that you know more about this city than anyone else.”

“I don’t need the hat to do that,” he sets it on her head with that crooked smile, “plus, it just makes me think about you now and I don’t need the extra distraction.”

“You should probably get going,” she checks the time, pushing him gently towards the door before he can invent any other reasons to delay.

“Right,” he leaves the room and she pauses to put the hat back on its unofficial headboard hook before following. Hiccup is standing in the middle of the living room with the TV remote in hand, paused mid-step to watch something.

 “…recent events, it was decided that the apartment complex at 324 Harbor Road would be converted into low income housing, however when renovation began in the second-floor apartment where Grimmel Grisly’s last murder recently occurred, a possible clue to a much more famous murder at the location was discovered.”

Hiccup looks at her, eyebrows raised as the anchor continues.

 “…possible forensic evidence found at the Elizabeth Smith crime scene could potentially reveal the true identity of Berk’s most famous outlaw, Viggo Grimborn, The Harbor Street Killer. We have an expert here to discuss the—”

The TV screen turns black and Hiccup tosses the remote onto the couch, where it bounces off of a throw pillow and onto the floor.

“You don’t want to watch that?” She cocks her head, his suddenly self-assured, almost peaceful smile catching her off guard.

“I like the mystery,” he repeats the words that infuriated her when a nuisance from another era stood in a courtyard and shouted them. “So, I’ve got to go convince a room full of architecture nerds that I’d really love to help them save some of the old buildings that Berk has left, especially if they pay me. Wish me luck.”

“You don’t need it,” she insists, “you’re going to do great. I love you.”

He stands up a little straighter when she says it, like he always does, and she believes her own assurance even more.
“Cool, I’ll call you when I’m done.” He points at the TV and whispers, conspiratorial tone lighter than she would have expected, “don’t go solving Grimborn without me, ok?”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

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