Once There Were Dragons

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Once There Were Dragons

by Areias

Summary

[Spoiler] Set 20 years post-Hidden-World

Every midsummer, the Haddocks made their way across the Great North Sea, back to the Hidden World where they could meet their dragons again. But as kings and empires rose in the East, and news spread about the wonders of the Archipelago, men sought after beasts of fire made flesh, for fire was power.

The fate of the Archipelago now rest on two families...

One with skin, the other with scales.
Three hundred years ago, at the dawn of the Viking Age, there existed a group of people who called themselves the Westerners. These were the dreamers, the explorers, the peace-lovers, who spurned the traditional way of pillage and plunder. Among them were members from all walks of life — warriors and shieldmaids, poets and inventors; adventurers and settlers.

When the land grew weary from too many mouths to feed, and Chieftains began looking East towards the wealth and riches of Continental Europe… the Westerners looked in the other direction. Their gazes passed through waves and storms and Thor’s mighty wrath, and where others saw danger, they saw their hope. The Western Exodus, it was called — scores of longships departed from docks and beaches all over the land, laden with food and brave people, sailing towards a brighter future.

For several moons, all everyone talked about was the Western Exodus, and it seemed the West might hold salvation after all.

Then the first survivors drifted ashore. They came back, less than one for every hundred that had set out, on makeshift rafts salvaged from the blackened husks of once-proud longships. They came back weeping, crying, screaming; of billowing smoke, of eternal flame, of great winged beasts rivaling the fearsome Níðhöggr itself.

Death lies in the West, they said to anyone who would listen. Death lies in the West.

And so these words were repeated, passed down, and hammered into truth. Death lies in the West, proclaimed the great Sagas of old. Death lies in the West, declared the gigantic runestones dotting the land. Decades turned into centuries, and by now everyone knew: Death lies in the West.

So, for three centuries, the Norsemen fought among themselves, and with anyone else who seemed to have loot worth taking. They raided far and wide, across straits and channels, up prosperous rivers, striking fear and devastation into the heartlands of Europe.

And in three hundred years of raiding, they never again ventured West.

It was the Year of Our Lord, 1060, and King Cnut the Great ruled with an iron fist over the entirety of Northern Europe.

The squabbling petty kings of Ireland had bowed under his overwhelming force, as had the barbaric tribes of Sweden, where pagan cults and human sacrifices were still the norm.

With the Holy Roman Empire sitting strong on the southern front, and with his hand bound by alliances or vassalage over smaller, weaker neighbors, the King seemed to be at the zenith of his power. Yet, when seated alone in his chambers, the map of the known world spread out before him, he would time and again look to the northwest, past the string of miserable islands that dotted the Scottish shores, into the blank unknown.

And in those quiet moments without his courtiers bothering him with trivial matters, he let his mind
drift to the old mariner’s myth he’d heard when he was but a young prince — legends of a whole new land, of islands uncountable in number; large and small, warm and cold, lush and bare… an endless chain of them dotting the waves like the Lord’s own treasure map, a vast Archipelago stretching across the Great North Sea.

It was called the ‘Wilderwest’, where the last remnants of the Westerners dwelled, isolated from the world.

The King was a practical man — a common trait for powerful rulers, who forged empires from ships and steel. As fascinated as he was by the myth of the Wilderwest, he sensibly restrained himself from throwing perfectly good ships and men to explore beyond the edges of the map. Instead, he focused his attention to domestic matters — he had three kingdoms to rule, after all.

But one day, a whaling longship had ventured too far from the coast, and got sucked into a mighty storm. Most thought her lost, and proper prayers were offered to both the Lord and the old god Njord. Life went on like normal, and the King wasn’t even aware of the incident… until the ship pulled in at Trondheim, carrying a massive dying form sprawled across its deck.

It was not a whale, nor a kraken, nor even some mythical leviathan.

It was fire made flesh.

And fire was power.

From that day on, the King knew two things:

One, the Wilderwest existed.

Two, he needed to conquer it.

Chapter End Notes

Don't worry! This prologue is only here to set the scene; from the next chapter on, this fic will go back to the Haddock family. I hope you enjoy reading, and please review/comment about what you liked/didn't like.

Cnut the Great was a Scandinavian/Viking King who ruled over the North Sea Empire (1016-1035), which consisted of Denmark, Norway, and England. This is purely an alternate timeline where he survived past 1035, and continued to consolidate power. I didn't research a whole lot into him, so if you're a history buff, I'm sorry for butchering historical accuracy!
A Family's Voyage

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The boy squinted eastward through his spyglass. His gaze passed over the wooden houses and distant trees, the seastacks and cliffs, sliding easily across leagues and leagues of the churning obsidian sea, until he reached the shimmering white line where ocean met sky.

Above, the heavens were already stained orange and yellow, and the few clouds he could see were sprinkled like powdered snow across the vast stretches of the vibrant firmamental canvas. The boy looked down to consult his compass, before tilting his spyglass a few degrees to the west.

There, just below the horizon, he saw the barest outlines of the great radiant orb, climbing imperceptibly slowly, as if just woken up. He imagined the goddess Sól, riding her flaming chariot, laughing as she taunted the wolves of darkness chasing after her.

And why wouldn’t she? She had a whole moon ahead of her where night wouldn’t be able to catch up, and she could frolic all she liked in the aether.

The boy observed the sunrise for a few more minutes before putting down his spyglass with a contented sigh. Tucking the handy instrument under his arms, he pulled his yak-fur coat around himself and hopped over the sturdy wooden rails enclosing the small observation platform. The sturdy little tower had rafters sticking out every which way, and he hopped from one to another with the easy grace of many years’ practice. It was scarcely ten heartbeats later when he landed with a thud on the well-worn road, and took off running.

He’d been through this path half a million times, so he closed his eyes and just enjoyed the crunch of the gravel under his boots and the clean crisp morning air on his skin.

He loved running down the hills this way. He loved the way his stomach lurched at every drop, the thrill of not being able to see what’s exactly in front of you, and most of all he loved how fast he could go. If he concentrated hard enough, it was almost like he was gliding down the hills, cerulean skies above him, the village buildings fading to playthings beneath him…

And ‘Wham!’ he smacked, headfirst into what felt like a small warm yak. The yak screeched and cursed, but the momentum was too great, and he felt himself knocking them both to the ground, landing with a great crash.

“Oww!” hissed the yak. “What the Hel!”

Only then did the boy remember to open his eyes, blinking as a mess of pale blonde hair thrusted itself into his face. He shook the stars out of his vision and blinked again, before recognizing the face hiding beneath the straw-colored locks. It was not a yak after all.

“Good morning, Buff,” he said. “Fancy seeing you so early.”

The girl underneath him was wrapped in a thick yak-hide cloak, currently pinned underneath them and acting as some kind of cushion for their fall. She was skinny and had a rather long face, and her sloppily braided hair tumbled past her shoulders in uneven buns, to cover basically half her body — the whole mess of which she was currently trying to clear from her eyes.

“Watch where you’re going, fishbrains!” she snapped as she brushed a stray strand away and spat
out a bit of dirt. Then she looked up at the culprit, glaring. “And what in Thor’s — oh. Oh. Uhm, hi, Finn.”

“Hi!” the boy, Finn, replied with a grin, oblivious to the sudden rosy color spreading over the girl’s cheeks. He pushed himself up from her and held out his hand. “Sorry about that. Are you hurt?”

“No, uhm, I’m fine,” the girl said. Tentatively she grabbed the proffered hand, and her face became instantly redder than the banners flying above the Chief’s residence.

“Are you sure?” Finn asked. He’d been running pretty fast, he reckoned.

“Y-yeah,” Buff muttered. She was busy trying to hide her face properly before pulling herself up.

Finn’s hand remained steady as it took on her weight — although he stood half a head shorter than his friend, and was exceedingly lanky for a Viking boy of almost-fifteen, the days spent in the training ring with his sister and tinkering in the forge with his father have made him lean, lithe, and stronger than he looked.

“Sorry again,” Finn said sheepishly as Buff steadied herself. “That’s never happened before. Anyway, what’re you doing up so early?”

“Ah, erm,” Buff stammered as Finn retracted his hand without a second thought. “well I — uhm, wanted to… watch the sunrise?”

Finn beamed. “Me too! It’s the last one we’ll get in almost a whole moon. Wouldn’t miss it for the world.” He scratched his head. “That and this trip with Dad. Speaking of which, I should be going; we’re leaving in a quarter eykt!” Finn gave Buff a friendly pat on the shoulder. “Happy sólmánuður to you!”

“H-happy sólmánuður,” Buff squeaked, but the boy was already bounding down the road, too far to hear her.

When Finn got to the Skydocks, there were about six or so dockhands helping to load up the smaller of the two royal longships, with barrels of provisions and trade goods such as the multipurpose Berkian shields — one of the many popular inventions of his father’s. Finn felt a flash of pride as he jumped over a stack of freshly-made shields — he recognized some of them as his handiwork.

“Mornin’, Finn,” a dockhand called out, grinning. His fellow workers looked up from their loading and waved. “Ahoy, lad.”

“Good morning,” Finn replied, hopping onto the pier planks. “Happy sólmánuður!”

“Aye, happy sólmánuður to you too, lad!”

Seeing as he came up to maybe the chest of an average grown Viking man, Finn got his hair ruffled more than a few times as he threaded his way through the dockhands, before finally reaching the longship. Though small, it was sturdy and strong, and a flying Night Fury adorned its majestic prow — the sigil of his father.

The ship itself hung from giant cranes, which jutted out from a few of the many elegant pillars standing at the edge of the Skydock. The bottom of the hull rested on air, instead of water, and about ten feet below it Finn could make out the storm-doors. It gave him a slight shiver to imagine what lied beyond those doors — almost four thousand feet of nothing but sky, straight down to the churning waves below.
The Skydocks of New Berk was one of the wonders of the Archipelago, and (like so many other things) the brain-child of its Chief. Powered by gale winds and the rushing water of Stoick’s Falls, it functioned through an intricate system of gears and pulleys, plucking longships right out of the sea like Valkyries guiding the spirits of fallen warriors to the gates of Valhalla.

It had been borne out of necessity more than anything — the island jutted out almost a quarter-league into the sky, with sheer cliffs on virtually every face... bad news for a skyfaring clan who had recently lost their dragons. They made do, for a little while, with a small port around one of the island’s only rock beaches, but longships had to be crammed liked sardines in a barrel to fit in the little inlet, and the hike back up was brutal (so said Uncle Fishlegs). Finally, the Chief had proposed the current design of elegant pulleys and winches. People had been skeptical at first, but once the first system was up and running, nobody ever looked back.

Giving the impressive mechanism a last appreciative look, Finn turned and leapt across the three foot gap between the ship and the pier, landing lightly on its deck. His things were already packed and ready to go, so he put himself to work rolling the barrels of smoked fish and clean water into the storage compartments belowdecks.

He was busy moving his third barrel when he heard a familiar voice.

“Finky! Finky-poo!”

He rolled his eyes and looked up. Only one person on New Berk called him Finky-poo. He barely had time to register the direction of the voice before a slender form in fur cloak and steel shoulder plates lunged right at him and barreled him over. His back slammed onto the deck with a wham.

“Oww! Why would you do that?”

“Only because I love you,” the voice said, and Finn felt a hand ruffling his hair before pinching his cheeks.

“Yeah, yeah, I love you too,” Finn said, exasperated. “Zeph, get off!”

Zephyr laughed and hopped off her brother. At sixteen, she was only slightly shorter than their mother, which meant she towered a full foot above Finn — something she never let him forget. Her brown hair was gathered into a simple but tidy braid, which trailed down to the small of her back, and her blue eyes twinkled as she watched Finn sit up, shaking his head.

“Oh, great,” he said, catching sight of the barrel he’d been tending to. Without a human chaperone, it rolled gleefully off to starboard, and, as both of them watched, bowled over a neat pile of oars, causing a small commotion. He turned back to his sister and rolled his eyes. “The future Chieftess, ladies and gentlemen.”

Zephyr gave him a light punch in the shoulder before yanking him up.

“And you would do well to remember that, brother,” she drawled in mock gravity, peering down austerely in her best imitation of what they’d termed their father’s ‘royal stare’. Finn smirked to himself as he met her eyes with the ready ease of years of practice — this contest was a little tradition of theirs, and as of last tally, he was winning by a long shot.

The trick, he thought smugly, was to empty his mind. He could do it in a heartbeat, and he did so now, thinking about what he would do once he was out at sea, and once his father finished all the boring grown-up business. He let his mind wander across the endless western stretches of the Great North Sea, to the stretches of the Archipelago where no people aside from his family had been, west
and west for two days until the drooping veil of mist and the thundering roar of the mighty waterfall at the ends of the world…

“Fink!” Zephyr said, grinning as she shook his shoulders. “Still with us?”

He blinked. “Did I win?”

“Ohh, rubbing it in, are we? Getting some cheek —” she grabbed him and pulled on the said cheeks — “for someone two years younger!”

“No not long!” Finn protested, his voice jumbled by the abnormal twisting of his mouth. “I’m turning fifteen —”

“No not you aren’t!” she singsonged. “Two years younger, Finky-bum!”

With a great shove, Finn finally got her demon grip away from his poor cheeks. He gave his sister an indignant puff. “And Mom says you’re the mature one.”

“I am the mature one,” Zephyr said, pretending to preen. “Admit it, you’ll be helpless without me. Maybe I should go on this voyage after all.”

Finn scoffed. “Dad and I will handle things just fine, thank you very much.”

Secretly, though, he wished more than anything that she and Mom could come. They’d always, always gone on this voyage together, as a family. They used to drive their parents crazy with all the bicker and banter that came with sharing tight quarters for half a moon. They’d always celebrated Finn’s name-day at sea, because he was a midsummer child; a child of the midnight sun.

But Mom was big-bellied with a little brother or sister, and Dad insisted that a voyage would be too dangerous for her, especially given how much she’d struggled when bringing Finn into this world. After that ordeal, Gothi had believed — they had all believed — another child to be impossible, but here they were.

The siblings fell silent. Finn knew Zephyr wanted badly, badly to come — these annual voyages were both of their absolute favorite parts of the year — but she never protested when Dad had asked her to stay behind to keep everything in order, and to keep Mom company. And though Finn’ll never admit it, that’s the thing about her that he admired the most, something that he could never do. When she began hosting the Council meetings last moon, he almost didn’t recognize her for how Chieftainly she’s become.

The longship swayed gently like a hammock on its rope, but both siblings remained surefooted. Behind them, on shore, Finn heard the dockhands hollering to say they’d finished with loading. Dad will be here any moment, and then it would be time to lower away.

He wanted to say something, to make a joke maybe, but his mind was blank. Zephyr cleared her throat a couple times, but it seemed she couldn’t find anything to say either. Finally, she dug inside her vest.

“I wanted to hide it on the ship,” she said softly. “But I was worried Finky-poo would be too careless to find it.”

She pulled out a small white statuette a second later, no larger than his palm. Finn’s mouth dropped open.

“Here, take it,” Zephyr said. “It’s… an early name-day present. From me and Mom.”

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“Here, take it,” Zephyr said. “It’s… an early name-day present. From me and Mom.”
Finn carefully took it into his hands. It was carved somewhat crudely into the tell-tale shape of New Berk, and still warm from her fingers. He could see the beacon tower, and the docks at the very bottom, and the great plaza where their grandfather’s statue stood. But the most detailed part was at the very top, past all the roofs of the other houses — the Chief’s residence and the Meade Hall. If he squinted, he thought he could just make out five little figures standing before the tall oaken doors — Mom, Dad, Grandma, Zeph, and himself.

“Zeph,” he began, trying hard to keep his voice from cracking. “I —”

She didn’t wait. Abruptly, she pulled him in and hugged him tight. For a moment, Finn was five years old again, crying in her arms as she gave Spikelout Jorgensen a good kicking for bullying him.

“Come back safe, Finky-bum,” she said quietly, her voice quavering as well. “And happy fifteenth name-day.”

Author's Note:

1. In Norse mythology, the Sun goddess Sól, and her brother the Moon god Máni, are chased across the sky by gigantic wolves of darkness, and they have to keep moving to stay alive.

2. An eykt (or átt) is the Viking way of keeping time. It’s roughly three hours, since a 24-hour day consisted of 8 eykt.

3. Sólmánuður, or the “Month of the Sun” and the height of summer, corresponds roughly to our July. It is sometimes synonymous with the midsummer celebrations.

EDIT:

I DREW THEM! This is what I imagine them to look like! Also on my tumblr.
I LOVE the Haddock children. I love both their names, their design, and love imagining what they might grow up to be like. This is basically one giant Hiccstrid children headcanon! Enjoy!

EDIT: Thanks Smoe05 for pointing out that New Berk uses winches and pulleys instead of docks. I've changed the chapter accordingly.
Zephyr took a long breath, eyes trained on the spear across her. She subtly shifted her weight to her left. The sand of the Arena felt warm and soft as it shifted under her bare foot.

Sweat dripped down from her temples. Her hair was braided up into a bundle behind her, and she was glad she didn’t have any loose strands sticking to her face, obscuring vision.

Her opponent skirted around her, wary. Zephyr drew her spear back a fraction of an inch, and instantly her opponent lunged. Zephyr could see the movements, predict where the strike would land — her right flank probably looked like a good target.

Two clean *clacks*, the sound of wood pole on wood pole, then a flurry of footsteps.

Zephyr didn’t press her advantage. This was the fourth parry, and it shouldn’t be long now; each time their spears met, he expended more energy than she did. All she had to do was to keep up the defense, and —

Her opponent’s left foot slid in the sand as it stepped down. He hadn’t noticed the small dune that’d formed from their previous jostling, and for a fraction of a heartbeat his weight was in the air, unanchored as he readjusted his footing.

Zephyr lunged. Her spear arced through the dry hot air; her opponent was taken off-guard, he lifted his in response, but barely in time. She shifted her weight, making a motion to jab, but really it was a swipe… *yes*, he fell for it! She ducked to avoid his blow, then *whoosh* her swipe went, clean on his shin. He gasped, and she didn’t relent — sidestep, swipe again, one, two, *clack*, then an avalanche of blows to follow, one then another then another — she felt her strength waning, her muscles screaming —

“I yield!” Her opponent shouted, just as another blow threw him to the ground. Zephyr’s spear stopped half a foot from his throat. She blinked away the sweat around her eyes.

“That makes five wins out of five,” she panted, unable to stop the grin from spreading on her face. She tossed her spear at the weapons rack and took a deep long breath. She loosened the kransen around her forehead, and with a shake of her head, allowed the sweat-drenched locks to tumble down her shoulders and back.

“I slipped!” Spikelout huffed, sprawled out on the sand. “I *slipped*, okay? It’s not *fair*, you’re older!”

“And you’re heavier and stronger. Learn to use that strength, dear spikey cousin of mine.”

The boy growled. Zephyr laughed and left him to lick his wounds. The crowd surrounding them both had grown to twenty strong without her noticing. She spotted many of Berk’s younger generation staring at her in undisguised awe, and gave them a casual wave. “Anyone else?” she offered, nodding at the spear rack. “Come on, don’t be shy. Hey! Sniff, Buff, fancy a go?”

The two girls stood a little ways off, evidently just finished sparring themselves. Zephyr didn’t need to ask who won — Buffnut’s straw-blonde braids were sprinkled through with Arena sand, and she bore a massive scowl on her face. Snifflout was impassive and quiet as always, but perspiration glistened on her forehead, and she had a red, triumphant glow on her cheeks. Zephyr couldn’t help
but smile, because they made quite a pair — Buffnut was tall, lanky, and quick on her feet, like a slender wolf; Snifflout was almost two feet shorter, and built like a miniature hibernating bear.

Usually brazen in the face of challenge, this time Buffnut simply rolled her eyes. “I don’t have a death wish, Haddock,” she said, lifting a waterskin to her lips.

*Oh, that’s how it’s going to be, huh?*

“Buffy, Buffy…” she sighed, shaking her head in mock disapproval. “With an attitude like that, how will you ever beat me, and win my brother’s hand in marriage?”

Instantly water spewed out of Buffnut’s nose. The onlooking children shrieked with delight as they jumped back to avoid the disgusting spray. The poor girl’s face was as colorful as the sunset, and she’d started coughing so hard Zephyr almost felt sorry.

“Ha — ack — Haddock!” Buffnut yelled, and immediately went back into another coughing fit.

“Yeah?” Zephyr said, hiding a smirk. “Honestly, Buffy, you’ve got to be more careful with your water!”

Buffnut only glared daggers at her, but her still-rosy cheeks weren’t exactly adding to the intimidation factor.

“So… wanna spar?” Zephyr asked innocently.

“Why don’t you spar with Sniffles!” Buffnut snapped, before stomping off, an occasional cough trailing behind her.

“Maybe I will,” Zephyr said, grinning as she turned her attention to the shorter girl. “So, what do you say, Sniff? Ready to win my brother’s hand?”

Snifflout remained silent, and Zephyr shrugged. She knew better than to expect any sort of reaction. While she was fairly certain Snifflout also fancied Finky, the girl was just so… intense, in whatever she did, that it was impossible to embarrass her. In half of their sparring sessions, Zephyr almost expected her to just charge, like a raging yak.

Just as Zephyr was about to walk back, however, Snifflout looked up, and their gazes met. Fresh off a win, the shorter girl sported a martial glint in her eyes, and the red flush in her cheeks was tell-tale enough.

Zephyr cocked an eyebrow. “Best two of three?”

Snifflout only nodded, reticent still. Zephyr gave her a small smile, the kind you offered to worthy opponents. Though squat and heavyset like her twin brother, Snifflout trained three times harder than Spikelout ever did, and it showed — to this day, she remained the only teen on Berk who could force Zephyr to go all-out.

Zephyr stretched her arms to ease some of the knots left over from the last session. The bout with Spikelout hadn’t tired her out too much, and she could definitely use a round of heavy-duty sparring, something that would force her to claw at every single advantage in order to come out on top. Already, her body was rising to the challenge, muscles trembling as they anticipated the fight ahead. The crowd let out an appreciative noise, and stepped back to clear the necessary space.

“Give me a few breaths,” she told the girl, before she went over to the side of the Arena and found her waterskin. She wrenched the top open and let the liquid pour down her throat. Being
midsummer, the water was lukewarm and slightly slimy, but at that moment it tasted as good as the mead of the Aesir. She emptied the skin with a contented gasp and tossed it onto a stack of her clean clothes. A few rummaging grasps later, she fished out a fresh kransen from her bag, and put it on. She looked back at Snifflout, and found the girl staring at her, grey eyes like roaring flames.

“Zephyr!” someone shouted in a high-pitched squeal, shattering the tension. “Zephyrrrr!”

Everyone turned. Zephyr chuckled when she saw the source of the noise — a chubby blond boy of around twelve, navigating the sandy Arena floor with the grace of a drunken Berserker walking a tightrope. To make matters worse, he seemed intent on waving as he toddled forth, which did nothing to help his balance.

“Zephyr!!” he shouted again, his voice shrill and excited.

“Slow down!” Zephyr yelled at him. She waited for a few heartbeats, and saw that the boy had no intent of slowing down. Shaking her head, she leapt to her feet and jogged her way over to him. That lad was a hazard to himself.

“Hey!” he beamed at her as she approached, his wide friendly face shiny with exertion. “Zephyr!”

“I’m here, I’m here,” Zephyr said, smiling. Out of all the village children, she was the most fond of him; partly because he wasn’t a moron like his two sisters, and partly because he reminded her of Finky in many ways. “What’s up, Fluffy?”

“I’m here to deliver a message, Zephyr!” the boy replied. “From the Council.”

“Oh boy.” Zephyr barely managed to stop herself from wincing. “Alright, Fluffy. Let’s hear it.”

Fluffnut Ingerman puffed out his plump little chest and cleared his throat. Then, speaking with a self-important air:

“The Chieftess wishes me to inform you, that the Council requests your presence at once.”

“Thank you, courier,” Zephyr said, struggling to keep a straight face. Fluffnut sketched a bow, and she snorted. “Anyway, did she say why?”

Fluff shrugged. “I’unno. Something to do with a meeting?”

Fluff shrugged. “I’unno. Something to do with a meeting?”

“Well someone’s impatient,” Zephyr grumbled. The Meeting was scheduled one eykt after lunch, since keeping Vikings well-fed minimized the risk of duels, houses on fire, and general chaos — but it wasn’t even close to lunch time. Zephyr felt a bit irked. Did her mother doubt her enough to send Fluffy to remind her? It wasn’t as if she would forget the most important time of the month, like some irresponsible mutton-headed…

Zephyr squinted. On the rim of the Arena’s walls, just below the audience stands, there were large markings carved into stone, splitting the day into their eykts. It was a handy tool, and precise, too, except when it was cloudy. Zephyr shifted her gaze towards where the sun was supposed to be.

It wasn’t there.

It was almost an entire marking ahead.

“Yak balls,” she said out loud, ignoring the gape on Fluffy’s face. She leapt into action just as he spoke, but she couldn’t care less. Bounding, she practically flew over the warm sands, kicking up a cloud around her as she landed beside her satchel bag.
She was aware of people staring at her. She snatched the satchel bag, her waterskin, and found her summer boots. She didn’t even bother to clean her soles of sand before she stuffed them inside her boots. The tiny particles crunched somewhat painfully each step.

“I’m sorry Sniff!” she called out to the dumbfounded girl across their practice ring. “I’ll make this up some other day!”

Before anyone could respond, she had dashed out of the Arena, hair flying in wild braids behind her, and was running straight up the path to the Meade Hall.

*Yak balls,* indeed.

Her position as the leading — and very late — member of the Council made a quiet entrance mostly untenable. Zephyr tried to steel herself before entering the grand oaken doors, expecting some jests or laughter, but she was wholly unprepared for *applause.* Her face burned hotter than the midsummer sun as she stole her way to the High Table at the end of the Meade Hall, wanting more with each passing breath to just burrow into the mountains and never come out again.

“Ahoy, there’s the lass!” a booming voice said, once she reached the dais on which the Table was placed. “Thought you’d been kidnapped by trolls!”

“Sorry, Uncle Eret,” Zephyr said meekly. “… lost track of the sun.”

“Lost track, eh?” a woman’s voice said, an odd mixture of sage and smug. “Sounds like a boy might be involved. Gotta keep a close eye on this one, Astrid.”

Zephyr almost sputtered as she made her way around. Gods, why did Dad have to build this table to be so ridiculously large?

“Stop embarrassing her, darling,” a gentle voice said. “It’s no worries, lass, happens to everyone.”

“Thanks, Uncle Fishlegs,” she managed to squeak out in response.

Somehow, their reactions to her tardiness made the whole situation even worse. Because of her stupidity, the meeting had been held back for half an eykt… she’d wasted everybody’s time, and would’ve wasted more had Mom not sent someone to tell her. Yet, instead of harsh words or reprimands, she only received jests and good-natured ribbing. She would’ve preferred the former, because she knew she deserved it — what kind of a mutton-head lost track of the time, and on such an important day?

She got to the center of the table after what seemed like a full eykt. In front of her was a massive chair hewn from entire logs of felled spruce, all polished to a dark shine. Countless carvings filled every surface, ornate and elaborate, but just rough enough around the edges that it conveyed a raw and awesome power, culminating in the massive relief of a Night Fury in flight.

This wasn’t Grandpa’s Chieftain chair that they’d brought with them from Old Berk — *that* piece of furniture was at home, in front of the fireplace, draped with comfy furs and already Grandma’s favorite perch. No… *this* chair, this chair was something else, something newly made, intentionally vast not only to command respect over Berkians, but all of the Archipelago, all of the two dozen Tribes who’d already signed the Wilderwest Treaty and bowed to become a member of the League.

It was, for all intents and purposes… a throne.

Her father had refused to call it a *throne,* of course. “I’m not a *king!*** he would say, when anyone
referred to it as such. “Come on, Astrid. Can you see *me* being a king?” And then he would laugh in that distinct way of his, and proceed to sit in the most undignified manner on the chair, just to illustrate his point.

But no matter what they called it — chair, seat, throne — Zephyr didn’t belong on there. She had to sit at the very edge, otherwise her feet would be dangling childishly in the air, and she was painfully aware how small the furniture made her look. A leader was supposed to dominate their seat; this seat dominated her.

And now, being irresponsibly, *horribly* late, she didn’t feel she had a right to sit at all.

“‘Well?’ a voice called. ‘Zeffie, what are you waiting for? Sit down.”

Zephyr turned to see her mother, seated just to the right of her, looking elegant and beautiful as she reclined on her own chair, even with her massive protruding belly.

“Sorry, Mom,” Zephyr said, wincing as she did so. “I was at the —”

“‘Come now,” her mother said softly, reaching over to brush a strand of hair from out of her eyes. “I know a sparring look when I see one. I remember what it’s like to want to swing my axe at everything.”

“I thought you never outgrew that phase, Astrid,” a voice sniggered from close by.

“Shut up, Snotlout,” her mother replied almost automatically. “Zeffie?”

“‘Right,” Zephyr said, shuddering a little as her bum touched the cold wood of the great chair. She looked around the High Table — friendly faces looked back at her, faces she’s known all her life, faces who’d watched over her as she grew up. It calmed her nerves, if only a little. Mostly she was still thinking how she didn’t belong here, shouldn’t be saying those words.

She took a deep breath, and when she spoke, her voice was mostly steady.

“As Acting-Chief of Berk, I hereby call together this Council Meeting, in the time of Sólmánuður, and ask for Odin’s blessings in the endeavors of our Tribe and our Council.”

She closed her eyes, feeling wretched and small and utterly unworthy.

“In the name of the Chief, let the Meeting commence.”

Chapter End Notes

Zephyr’s more complicated to write than Nuffink, in my mind; because she’s juggling with so much of what she loves and what her responsibilities permitted her. Please let me know if her characterization sounded weird. I hope to introduce more of the Gang’s children!
A Breaker's Welcome

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for the kudos/favs, and kind comments/reviews. Every time I get an email notification it brightens my day, thank you all!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The longship sliced easily through the choppy waves.

Finn stood beside the steering-oar, stripped to his faded wool tunic. It was not remotely warm — the sea-breeze was substantial this evening, if somewhat erratic, and even with the sun still high up in the sky, parts of his tunic was still damp from a particularly high wave earlier. In any other circumstance he would’ve put on an extra layer… but at this moment, his hair remained slick with sweat, and more beaded on his forehead.

He’d have to deal with that later.

He checked over everything once again. The riggings seemed to be in order, so did the heading, and the steering-oar.

A fortuitous gust punched him in the back, and he took his eyes away from the prow, just long enough to see the giant red square of their sail billow out and strain against its lines. He felt the ship lurch as it bounced over a small wave, aided by the sudden momentum. His hand on the steering-oar was clammy, for the unruly thing was bound to the longship by only a sturdy hemp rope, and threatened to slip from his grasp at any moment.

Just a bit more, Finn thought to himself, which did little to calm his racing heart. The last leg of this journey had claimed more men and ships than anyone dared count. He spared another glance to the sails, and saw they were still going strong. He checked his bearings. Straight ahead, the Maw seemed narrower than he’d remembered.

He gulped as he saw the turbulence just beyond the narrow opening, and to the sides where waves twenty feet high smashed themselves into brilliant white spray against the dark jagged rocks. It was his first solo pass, and there were an infinite number of things that might go wrong. What if he couldn’t control the ship? What if he’d read the currents wrong? What if —

A strong hand clasped him on his shoulders.

“You’ve got this, Captain Fink,” his father said, calm and confident. “We’ve dealt with worse, right? Just keep your grip steady, let the ship guide you… a bit to starboard now… attaboy. Notice how the sails are reacting?”

Finn took a deep breath of the salted air, and tasted a little sea-foam at the edge of his mouth. The trust in his father’s voice steadied his hands, bringing back happy memories of all the long hours they’d spent together, at the helm of a ship. The evening sun shone on their backs, and the water glittered before them, and he exhaled.

Yeah, they’ve dealt with worse. He’s dealt with worse.
He could do this.

They rode the wind over one wave, then another, and another. Finn corrected for any deviations in their course almost as soon as they occurred. The strong hand on his shoulder never faltered, so Finn’s hold on the steering-oar never did either. Nothing else mattered — there was only the sea, the ship, and the Maw ahead, looming closer and closer until all Finn could see were the towering formations guarding the entrance to the bay.

“You’re doing amazing,” his father said, voice still calm as he uttered a steady stream of encouragements. “That’s it.”

Fifteen feet. Thirteen. Finn tore his eyes away from the cliffs, and focused on the waterway.

Ten feet. Seven. Five.

And then they were upon the pass.

For a terrifying three seconds, they were blind — waves all around crushed themselves upon the lethal rocks, blanketing the pass with an explosion of white mist. Finn was almost scared, but as long as he felt the warm grip on his shoulder, even as the remnants of the waves splashed down onto the decks, he knew he was invincible.

And indeed he was. When the last of the deluge finally cleared off their deck, they had spilled into the sheltered waters of Berserker Bay.

Finn hadn’t realized he’d been holding his breath, and the moment he exhaled he actually saw stars in front of him. He looked back at the narrow entrance, heart still racing, almost dazed with disbelief. Then the magnitude of the feat struck him.

He’d sailed solo past the Berserker’s Maw. He made it… by Njord! He made it!

His father beat him to the celebrations. “Wooo-hooo!!” the Chief hollered, almost ridiculously loud, arms shooting in the air, “Attaboy, Captain Fink! Wooo-hooo-hooo!”

The man’s voice was brimming with unabashed pride, and Finn got that half-embarrassed, half-fuzzy feeling in his stomach, even though there was no one else around.

“We’re not there yet, Dad,” he muttered, blushing, but a stupid grin spread across his face. Both of them were soaked clean through, and Finn knew they needed to change into presentable clothes for their hosts. Yet, when he felt those strong arms wrap around his shoulders again, rustling him, and the fingers ruffling his hair, he couldn’t resist and let out a whoop of his own.

“That’s the spirit!” his father cried. “Louder! Wooo-hooo! All hail Captain Fink!”

Finn laughed. At that moment, a shaft of sun pierced through the Maw, and he looked up just as his father looked down. Two pairs of identical green eyes met, alive with light.

They did manage to reach the docks with fresh clothes, though thrown on practically the last moment. Now that his nerves settled, Finn began to feel a bit chilly, especially as his hair was still a tumbled wet mop. He pulled the hem of the soft white tunic he’d hurriedly shrugged on, attempting to smooth it a bit more, and wrapped himself in the single fancy wolfskin coat that he’d brought with him.

His father stood beside him in all sorts of fine leather garments, his massive fur cape draped over his
back and fastened with Night Fury pins around the shoulders. How the man managed to dress so fast was beyond him.

Soon, their longship came upon the docks, and a cheer went up as they rowed themselves in. A particularly striking man was standing at the very front of the welcoming party, and he stepped forward to catch the mooring line thrown to shore, before reeling their ship in with what looked like very little effort.

“How nice of you to welcome us,” Finn heard his father say, as they stepped onto the planks. “I see you haven’t lost your sailor’s touch.”

“Brother!” cried the man, a wide grin on his face. “On behalf of the Berserker Isles and the Defenders of the Wing, I welcome you and your kin, and offer onto you our hearth and mead. May Njord safeguard you in your travels, and may his son Freyr bring your clan a bountiful harvest.”

He was wrapped in what looked like a giant grey bear’s pelt, and his fiery hair and beard made him look part-bear himself. Though shorter than his Berkian counterpart by a few inches, the Berserker Chieftain was stocky and more powerfully built. Three savage tattoos carved a claw-mark over his left eye, and a brutal scar stretched across his right cheek, lending him an almost feral aura.

Dagur the Dauntless might be so called now, but Finn always thought there was a kind of barely-bound, barely-controlled lunacy inside the man, which befitted his title from the decades past. The boy could never understand how his father had come to call this man not only his friend, but his —

“Brother,” his father said, with genuine warmth, as he went forth and clasped the man’s outstretched hand. “On behalf of Berk and my kin, I accept your offer. May the Allfather bless your endeavors, and may his son Thor bring you fair weather and good growth.”

Formalities thus exchanged, the two men visibly relaxed, and enveloped each other into a gruff hug.

“Looking well, you scrawny scoundrel,” Chief Dagur said, once they pulled away.

“And you grow more radiant each passing year,” his father retorted with a dry smirk. “Motherhood obviously suits you.”

The gathered Berserkers guffawed at their Chief’s expense. Any other men making such a jest would currently be dodging a few flying axes, but the villagers were obviously used to the camaraderie between the two Chieftains. Dagur himself only rolled his eyes before glancing at Finn, and the longship behind them.

“Ahoy lad,” he said. “Get your mother, will you, and tell her she needs to come and reign this in!”

“It’s rude to gesture to all of me,” his father replied, smiling. “Anyway, Astrid’s back home, so’s my eldest — I’m afraid you’re stuck with the more obnoxious half of our family this year.” He ruffled Finn’s hair. “Say hi, Fink. Where are your manners?”

“Hello, Uncle Dagur,” Finn said in a small voice. He’d always been a little… afraid of the man, if he were to be honest. Even now, vestiges of an almost irrational urge tugged at him to hide behind his father’s cloak. He knew the man adored him, and in every past visit he’d been showered with gifts, but a scary face popping out from under the bed during story time, with but the dimmest of lights from the fireplace illuminating its scarred features… not an image that washed easily from a four-year-old’s memory.

Dagur laughed. “Gods, the lad does remind me of you, when I was still throwing knives at your head. Is Astrid okay, though?”
“I’m lucky I survived your visits,” Dad chuckled. “And yeah, she’s grand… her belly, too.”

Before the Berserker Chief could puzzle out what this meant, a long squeal drew all of their attention. Finn looked to the side of the wharf, and saw a beautiful woman with jet-black hair trailing down in rivulets over her shoulder. She was dressed expensively in leather and steel armor, and the insignia of a Skrill adorned her elaborately decorated shoulder plates. In short, she looked every bit as striking as her brother, if for different reasons.

“You guys are having another baby?” she gushed, rushing up to Dad and enveloping him in a flying hug. “Oh, congratulations!”

“Thank you, Heather,” Dad said, hugging her back with the ease of a two-decade-long friendship. “I’m sorry I couldn’t bring her; you guys probably have a lot to catch up on.”

“You have no idea,” Heather said, grinning. “But you’re right, of course; safety comes first. Oh, I’m so excited!”

“By the gods!” Dagur said, finally catching on. “You’re having a third child!” Then he looked crestfallen. “And before me and Mala… oh, this is a travesty! We must remedy this, tonight! Mala! Mala dear! We must have another child at once!”

Heather snorted and pushed her brother away. “It’s not a race!” she said, thumping the Chief on his head. “And stop that kind of inappropriate talk, there are young ears.” She turned to Finn and winked. “Come on, lad, let’s leave these idiots and get to the Meade Hall. This calls for a feast!”

Like most islands of the Archipelago, the Berserkers had their Meade Hall carved right into the mountain side. The massive door was fashioned from several logs of spruce wood, with a Skrill on the right and an Eruptodon on the left — the sigils of the Berserkers and the Defenders.

It was approaching night time, and Finn felt his mouth water as he followed Aunt Heather into the giant vaulted hall — roasted meat, crackling venison fat, the thick aroma of stews mixed with chopped coriander and the spicy tang of horseradish… it smelled delicious! Once his eyes adjusted to the dimmer, flickering light of the flames, he felt his stomach lurch with longing as he made out three spit-roasts spread out across the floor, massive boars on each and every one of them. A gurgling pot hung above the great fire pit in the center, half a man tall; enough to feed the entire island.

A tall, austere-looking woman with short blonde hair stood at the center of the raised dais at the end of the hall, shouting orders. Servants scurried in front of her; feeding flames, sprinkling salt, setting tables, and pouring mead, like worker bees around their queen. Even in summer, she was dressed in all-black armor, rich and supple leather reinforced by dark steel, lined by faded gold stripes.

“Ach, Hiccup Haddock!” she called out, her voice refined and elegant, yet still powerful enough to cut through the din of the Hall. She sported only a small smile, reserved as always, but the spark in her pale green eyes suggested real warmth and joy. “And young Nuffink. Welcome!”

“Ahe,” Dad said, waving as they stepped further into the Hall. The Chieftess of the Berserkers hopped off the dais in a graceful flourish and met them halfway. Aunt Mala was never a hugsy person, so Dad held out his hand for her to shake. “This smells like it came straight from Valhalla!”

“You flatter us,” Mala said, obviously pleased. “I trust Dagur hasn’t given you too much trouble?”

“The woman turned.

“Hey Mala,” Dad said, waving as they stepped further into the Hall. The Chieftess of the Berserkers hopped off the dais in a graceful flourish and met them halfway. Aunt Mala was never a hugsy person, so Dad held out his hand for her to shake. “This smells like it came straight from Valhalla!”

“You flatter us,” Mala said, obviously pleased. “I trust Dagur hasn’t given you too much trouble?”
“What?” sputtered her husband, who had been trying to snag a roasted quail from one of the fire pits. “Me? No way, butterfly, you know me! By the way, please ask why Astrid isn’t here? Please ask, please ask!”

Mala frowned, eyes settling on Heather, who shrugged with a wink. “I assumed she’s with young Zephyr, farther down the road, but she didn’t come this year?”

“Nope!” Dagur said, exuberant. “Oh, I’ll just spill it; she’s going to be a mom!”

Mala blinked, and gestured to Finn. “She already is, dear,” she said. Then in a lower voice she asked Heather, “Has he been eating those forest mushrooms again?”

“Not that I know of, no,” Heather replied with a snort, and decided to spare everyone from any more of her brother’s antics. “He means Astrid is having another baby. Hiccup told us just now.”

There was a small silence as Mala stared at Dad, who nodded with a soft smile. The Chieftess’ hand went to cover her mouth. “My gods, that is fantastic news!” she exclaimed. “Congratulations!”

“I’m not the one doing the heavy lifting,” Dad said wryly, “but thank you. We were surprised as well.”

“See? Isn’t this wonderful?” Dagur sidled closer. “And I was thinking, Mala dear, since our kids are all so similar in age, maybe there’s a chance we can get one too? Later toni—”

Mala socked him square in his stomach. Nobody batted an eye as he fell sideways to the ground, writhing.

“There are young ears present,” the Chieftess said calmly, shaking her head. Then she did a small wave. “Over here, Sigfrid!”

Finn turned around. A tall girl with short red hair approached them with feline grace. She was about as tall as Zeph, though her sleek black leather armor made her a touch more fierce than Zeph usually was. She had the strong chin of her parents, and her eyes were a mix of both of theirs — Uncle Dagur’s meadow-green, and Aunt Mala’s sea-green, a blend of earth and water.

“Mother,” Sigfrid nodded as she came upon the group, smiling in that prim and proper way she’d obviously inherited. Then her smile warmed and thawed. “Uncle Hiccup!”

“Hey Sigfrid,” Dad grinned. “Got anything neat to show me this time?”

The girl’s cheeks took on a pale shade of pink, and she nodded. “Quite a few. I was thinking maybe, uhm, tomorrow after breakfast, we can—”

“Deal!” Dad said. “It’ll be the highlight of my visit.”

Sigfrid beamed. Finn made a face — did she really have to fawn? It was his Dad, not hers.

The girl must have seen his expression, however, for suddenly she turned, and the smile wiped from her face like sand drawings at high tide. Her brows scrunched ever so slightly in distaste. “Oh, it’s you. Where’s your sister?”

Finn sighed. “Thrilled to see you too, Sig.”

“Answer my question.”

“She’s back home, with my Mom.”
“Why?”

“You could ask a little nicer, you know?”

“Answer my question.”

Finn rolled his eyes. The adults had fallen silent the moment she laid eyes on him, and he hated how they stood around, doing nothing aside from smirking and winking at each other as they witnessed the exchange. Sigfrid’s steely stare met his, sea-green on forest-green. Finn sighed again, and decided he should humor her if he wanted his dinner anytime soon.

“If you must know, my Mom is pregnant.” He said gruffly, and crossed his arms — which was rather pathetic for a move of defiance. Still, he felt the need to make some sort of statement, to show he wasn’t intimidated by her, and wouldn’t be bossed around. Especially ever since… that, and she’d started treating him like —

Growwllll went his stomach, choosing the worst possible moment to make its displeasure known.

Finn flushed as the adults broke out in uproarious laughter, and briefly considered throwing himself into the fire pit when he saw Sigfrid sporting a smirk, too. And honestly, did his own father really have to laugh quite that hard?

So much for standing his ground.

It was Aunt Mala who finally came to his rescue.

“Stop that, all of you,” she chided, although she too had a rare open smile on her face. “He’s a growing boy; I’m sure you all remember how that felt. Hiccup Haddock, are you feeding him enough?”

“Oh believe me, he could eat a boar by himself,” Dad answered as he finally stopped laughing. “He just hasn’t hit the spurt yet. I guess he takes after me in the growth department.” He chuckled as he noticed the disgruntled look on Finn’s face, and reached out to ruffle his son’s hair.

That was when Finn saw the bright flash in the man’s forest-green eyes.

Uh oh.

He’d been a Haddock long enough to recognize that look, and felt himself shrivel with anticipated mortification as exhibits of past events paraded through his mind. There was the time he’d made his first toy sword… the time Zeph had thrown her first axe… the time he’d beaten his first opponent in the Arena… Oh, gods, please, anything but this… he’d rather go back to being laughed at for his stomach growls…

“Dad —” he began, in a futile attempt to avert disaster, but deep down he knew all hope was already lost. When his father got that Look, no one could stop the carnage that laid ahead — not him, not his mother, not even Zeph.

“What’s that, Fink?” his father said, unnecessarily loud. “You’re starving?”

“Dad —” Finn whispered again, trying to tug on his father’s sleeve, painfully aware of how gazes were beginning to shift.

“Of course you’re starving!” his father boomed. Oh gods, he was using his Chieftain voice. Finn groaned, knowing the entire Hall probably had its attention on them by now. There was nothing else
to do but steel himself and brace for impact, which came after a well-mediated pause:

“I would be starving too,” Dad said, “if I singlehandedly sailed past the Berserker’s Maw.”

The Meade Hall fell silent. Finn watched in abject horror as the syllables echoed around the rafters and beams, penetrating the general chitchat. All villagers turned to stare at him — at him. He willed the floor to collapse beneath him as he felt his entire blood supply rush into his head.

The heartbeats thumped by. Then the Hall erupted, with twenty, fifty people all trying to talk over each other.

“By Njord, such a small lad?”

“Yer tellin’ me, that scrawny thing sailed past the Maw?”

“Gods be good, surely it wasn’t completely solo?”

“Aye, the Chief must’a helped him with the sails, or oars, or something!”

“Completely solo!” Finn heard his father shout, still using his Chieftain voice to be heard above the chaos. “Completely! I swear on the honor of Clan Haddock!” Which drew another great collective gasp of amazement and disbelief.

Thor, kill him now.

“Ahh!” Aunt Heather squealed, dragging Finn away from his father’s side and squeezing him in a hug. “This is amazing! Our little Fink is all grown up! I can’t believe it! You’re what, fifteen?”

“Fourteen for four more days,” Dad answered, beaming. “I believe that’s a record broken. Brother?”

“By Odin, I do believe you’re right!” he heard Uncle Dagur shout enthusiastically. “The last record was held by yours truly, and I was sixteen!”

The crowd around them ooo’d and aww’d again, and Finn felt himself being patted on the back more times than he could count. He was sure one of his braids had come unraveled. His father said something else, and there was another cheer, and suddenly he was being thrown up into the air, the ceiling of the Meade Hall looming closer then dropping away as he fell. Vaguely he heard the entire Hall chanting, “Maw Breaker, Maw Breaker!”, which didn’t even make sense but he was being thrown up again, and he was dizzy and the entire Hall was spinning, and it was all he could do to keep his poor empty stomach from heaving.

Thor, please kill him now.

Chapter End Notes

1. THW IS FINALLY OUT IN NORTH AMERICA! GO SUPPORT IT!
2. Here we see Dadcup in his natural habitat, being an Embarrassingly Proud Dad™, and you cannot change my mind.
3. The next Nuffink-centric chapter will get more into what I think happened offscreen in HTTYD2, and in THW (and what happened to the Berserkers’ + Defenders’ dragons) And also the history between him and Sigfrid!
Zephyr slumped on the great chair, feeling exhausted, relieved, and woefully inadequate… in that order.

The meeting had lasted just under an eykt — rather average, all things considered. But still her mind had managed to drift away as the adults plotted the fishing routes for this moon, finalized plans for the midsummer festivals, and argued about how they would distribute the newly-tilled farmlands to the southeast. In the middle of the session there had been a report on the Training Arena and how all the children were doing — which was the only topic of discussion she knew anything about, one which she engaged in with gusto. But then the agenda called for a tally of all the imports and exports for last moon, and an inventory of their stores in preparation for winter, and she almost fell asleep again.

It was *unbecoming* of her. Not only had she been late in the first place, she had bumbled, forgotten words, spaced out. She was a complete wreck, and had her mother not been there, the Meeting would’ve been in shambles. All her Aunts and Uncles had been extremely patient with her, which only served to make her feel like a child… someone who had to be tolerated, instead of held accountable for her mistakes.

She didn’t understand why her mother couldn’t just host the Meeting herself. Or Uncle Fishlegs — in the past, when they went on the trip, it’s always been Uncle Fishlegs who stood in for Dad. That would’ve been better for everyone involved.

“It’s alright to sigh,” her mother chuckled from the seat next to her. She rubbed her swollen belly as she watched Zephyr, a small smile playing at the edge of her lips. “But you did very well today.”

“By Loki’s standards, maybe.” Zephyr rolled her eyes. “I froze when Uncle Fishlegs asked me to host the vote, and I stammered for like, fifty heartbeats, when Auntie Ruff asked that question about the new fishing grounds. Not to mention totally zoning out on Uncle Snotlout. I may as well have been a sheep!”

They were the only ones left in the Meade Hall, so Zephyr let herself loose a little. Her mother was always someone she could count on to knock some sense into her — figuratively or physically, sometimes both. She was the first one Zephyr went to when something troubled her — like the time she’d overheard a visiting Chieftain doubting Berk’s decision for a female heir, or the first time she’d found blood in her nightclothes, and avoided poor Finky for a whole three days because she was terrified of spreading the plague to him.

This time, however, her mother had neither wisdom nor punch to impart. All throughout Zephyr’s rant, she only watched and smiled, like some benevolent owl with a particularly low-bar sense of humor. It was weird, and unnerving… and *very* exasperating. Naturally, it made any further ranting
all but impossible.

“Hello? Mom? Any chance you might wanna, you know, respond? Or are you just gonna sit there and smile at me?”

Her mother didn’t immediately answer. And when she did, she did so with a start, like she had been daydreaming.

“Probably just sit here and smile. Is that a problem?”

“Is that a problem? Is that a problem?” Zephyr let out a noise of incoherent frustration. “Your daughter is clearly distraught. She sees no evidence of motherly concern. Yes, she finds that a problem!”

Her mother stretched in her seat and gave a languorous sigh. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Zeffie. I’m just admiring my little girl, and how fast she’s growing up.”

“My gods, Mom. Way to ignore the Crimson Goregutter in the room.”

“Come now, don’t put yourself down like that. You’re a lot more beautiful than a Crimson Goregutter.”

“You know what I mean!” Zephyr couldn’t decide if she wanted to scowl or laugh. “Mom, if you keep this up, there will be consequences!”

“I’ll take my chances,” her mother answered. The woman actually had the audacity to giggle.

Zephyr rolled her eyes. While Mom usually featured as the ‘serious stickler’ in her Aunts’ and Uncles’ anecdotes, Zephyr had always known her to be somewhat of a jester at heart, with a tongue as sharp as her battleaxe should she chose to use it (three decades spent with Dad had to count for something, right?) It was usually fun to banter around with her, but this time Zephyr only felt annoyed and ignored. She wondered if it had been right to stay behind after all — maybe she should go back to the Arena, and make good on that spar with Snifflout.

Something must have crossed her face, because her mother’s expressions softened.

“I know you’re disappointed in yourself, Zeph,” her mother said gently, serious for the first time. “But I’ll say this one more time: you did very well.”

“Thank you for finally noticing your daughter’s distress,” Zephyr quipped, hiding her relief that they were no longer beating around the bush. “And Mom, I didn’t. Saying it doesn’t make it any closer to the truth.”

“Well, what do you expect? It is only the second Council Meeting you’ve chaired. No need to fret if a few things didn’t go according to plan.”

“First off, you really need to rethink your definition of ‘a few’. Secondly, I don’t need excuses, Mom. I’ve been listening in on Meetings for an entire year already! I know all the rules, the decorum. I shouldn’t have frozen up, or forgotten the words. Or been late!” Despite herself, Zephyr felt her cheeks redden with frustration.

“You get that from me,” her mother said fondly. “Always striving for perfection.”

“I think you mean ‘striving to not mess up’, ”
“Nobody expects you to Chief right off the saddle, Zeffie. You have to give yourself some flying room.”

“Yeah,” Zephyr mumbled. “If I don’t crash and burn first.”

“Stop with that defeatist nonsense,” her mother chided. “I’m going to repeat this again: you did very well.”

“Mom, I told yo—”

“And this time, I want you to say it. Repeat it, after me.”

Zephyr stared. Her mother stared right back at her, blue eyes focused and unperturbed. It was clear who was going to win.

She gave a dramatic sigh. “You did very well,” she intoned in a deadpan. “Good job, Mom.”

“Zephyr,” Mom said. “You know what I mean.”

Her voice wasn’t brisk, or impatient, but there was something unmoving in the timbre — not quite stern, yet not exactly gentle, either. Suddenly Zephyr realized the atmosphere had changed. Where it was light and breezy, it was now… sober. Earnest, even. It was a gods-given talent how fast she could change the mood, going from playful to dead serious as fast as Thor’s bolt.

It also felt very… Mom. This was her way of saying, ‘I care’.

And as strange as it was, the half-command, half-reprimand gave Zephyr what she needed to push herself over.

“I did… very well,” she finally muttered, voice low.

“Good. Again?”

“I did very well.”

“Now say it louder. Because it’s the truth.”

“I did very well!”

She almost shouted the words, and they echoed and reverberated, condensed and distilled, before nestling themselves around her like a Snoggletog scarf that didn’t exactly fit, but was warm and soft nonetheless.

Her mother’s face broke into a smile.

“See, that wasn’t so hard, was it?”

“No,” Zephyr said, and this time she meant it. She wasn’t sure if she believed the words just yet, or if she ever would, but they sat in a fuzzy corner of her belly, and tethered her to all the strength and trust her mother had to offer. And perhaps that was enough for now. “Thanks, Mom.”

“That’s what I’m here for,” Mom said. Then her hands went to her abdomen, and she grimaced. “Gods, I might soil myself if I don’t get home soon. I forgot how I hated this nuisance!” She leaned forward, put both her hands on the handle of her seat, and with a grunt raised herself up. “Ooh, she’s going to be a whopper!”
Zephyr had long since learned better than to go over to help. ‘Makes me feel old,’ her mother always quipped, before slapping away the outstretched hand. The woman may be heavy with child, but she was still the best shieldmaid in the Archipelago.

“How’d you know it’s a girl?” she asked instead. “Could be a boy.”

“I don’t,” her mother replied, giving the rotund bump another affectionate pat. “But carrying her reminds me more of carrying you than your brother. Finn’s always been quite a wee thing.”

“You mean I was a fat baby,” Zephyr said. “Thanks, Mom.”

“Oh, there’s no use denying that,” Mom laughed as she made her way to the edge of the dais. “You were a fat baby. But we wouldn’t have you any other way.”

Despite being close to term — another moon was their estimate — she had no trouble descending the steps. When she turned and looked back at Zephyr, the flickering flames danced between their identical blue eyes, strong and tethered.

“I’m so proud of you,” she said, easy and resolute. “Your father is, too, and everyone on the Council. Whenever you feel like you’ve messed up, just remember that — because that won’t change, no matter what happens.”

Zephyr’s eyes suddenly felt very tight. She blinked a few times, glad that Mom had turned around without noticing. She took three deep breaths as she watched her mother waddle down the center of the Hall.

“Thanks, Mom,” she called out, when she was sure her voice sounded normal. Her mother didn’t turn around, but lifted a hand.

“It’s nice out today, Zeffie. If you still feel stressed, just go out and spar. Kick some Jorgensen butts for me!”

Zephyr pushed shut the side door, and breathed in the air of the Meade Hall. Inside, only a few torches were ablaze, creating an immediate contrast to the brightness outside. She waited for her eyes to adjust to the relative dim, then took a cursory glance around the room. Nothing stirred from her entrance, and save for the gentle whistle of the draft through vents in the corners, all remained peaceful and still and quiet.

She didn’t know why she came back.

With daylight never-ending, it was somewhat difficult to keep track of time (she should know: it was the reason she’d been late), but judging from the aroma of food wafting through the village, and the lack of people in the streets, around dinner time would be her guess. Most of the village must have retired to their homes to eat and relax after a long day out in the sun.

A voice at the back of her mind nagged at her to go home. With Dad and Finky gone, the family dinner would be cut a few short, and her absence was bound to be noticed. She pushed the voice down, and stepped further in.

She wish she knew why she came back.

She’d taken Mom’s advice and gone to the Arena to spar, of course, but Snifflout’s absence left her with no opponent worth their salt. It had been fun teaching the younger kids, and she did feel proud when she saw their improvements, but it wasn’t what she’d hoped for — the challenge, the rush, the
excitement, the ability to shake her troubles off her back and dive in wholeheartedly… *that* was what she wanted.

After she’d cleaned herself and changed into fresh clothes, she’d once again found herself at a loss. Then the afternoon’s events came back to her, and she sort of got… overwhelmed. Yes, the words still warmed her — *I did very well* — but she never believed them in the first place. She did appreciate her mother’s efforts, for it gave her a sense of belonging, and the confidence of knowing she had the support of all the people who loved her — yet support and trust didn’t automatically make her a good leader, or solve her problems.

*She* had to do that, herself. And the Meade Hall was… a part of her problem, or at least she had a hunch it was. Perhaps that was why she came back.

And so here she was. Since she didn’t exactly envision a destination, she simply started walking.

A few torches were by no means enough to penetrate the gloom, but she didn’t mind. She was safe here; she had the entire floor map of the place memorized — every table, bench, or fire pit — and she wove a random path through them all, surefooted, her steps echoing slightly in the cool air.

Magnificent stone columns dotted the darkened chamber, their shadows soaring and flickering against the torches like guardian Jötnar, sentinels and protectors of Berk’s legacy. On the columns themselves, runes and myths were carved in swirling smokey lines, accounting the stories of their ancestors from before the move, of past Chieftains and their accomplishments.

And at the base, ringing the lowest six feet of every single column, there were dragons.

Dragons big and small, slender and chunky, flying and resting, spiked and smooth, of all shapes and sizes. Dragons uncountable in number, crammed into the space of a dozen columns. They jostled for attention like contestants of the Thawfest Games, slit-eyed and ferocious but also wide-eyed and amicable, and in the light of the flames they almost looked like they would come alive.

Many of the carved reliefs sported patches rubbed smooth and glossy over the years, and it was no wonder — even to this day, it wasn’t uncommon to see a Viking talking to one of the pillars during the quieter hours of the day, gently caressing a particular dragon’s snout or belly. Sometimes you’d find more than a few of them, huddled next to their particular dragon, sharing in the companionable loss that united them all.

For each and every one of the dragons on those columns had been real. *Are* real. Some children doubted the veracity of that claim, and thought their parents to be overly sentimental, but Zephyr didn’t blame them. How could they know? They hadn’t felt the warm snout at their fingertips. *They* hadn’t felt the wet slimy tongue fussing up their hair. *They* hadn’t felt the power and gentleness beneath them, as they rode the sky itself.

She wondered how her friend was doing. Had he grown? He must have, right? He’d been growing so fast the past few years, that every time she’d visited she had been astounded. He’d been so excited to show her, as well — bounding toward her with wide blue eyes that matched her own, and rubbing his white snout on her palm, making her laugh, before wrapping his tail around her and warbling, as if to say, *look! I can wrap my tail around you two times, now!*

She sighed and tore her eyes away from the columns, perfectly aware of his lack of representation — the pillars had been made before they knew he existed. She did carve a small figurine of him, though, which she usually wore as a necklace. She felt the weight of it around her neck just as her thought drifted, and wondered if he would miss her.
Would he leap over to Dad and Finky, then let out a confused purr as he noticed? Would he sniff and chirrup in disgruntlement as he watched his sister and father play with them? Would he flatten his ruff in annoyance as he watched them fly off, secretly still hoping she would show up? Would he pace about the ship, pawing at their stuff, before finally tilting his head and asking, *where’s my friend?*

Gods, she hoped he did. Because even though she would see him next year, and had asked Finky to bring him gifts in any event, she still missed him, so *so* much. The trip had always been the highlight of her year, and he had always been the highlight of the trip.

Zephyr shook her head vigorously, as if doing so could fling the thoughts from her mind. Her braid slapped her flanks as it swayed with her movements, as if to remind her how ridiculous she was acting. She felt a small grin creep across her lips, and stomped away the sudden flare of longing.

She wasn’t here to lament about what could have been, and make herself want to cry. She was here to... figure something out. Alone, in the dark, without Mom to tell her that everything was going to be alright.

Casting a cursory glance about the shadowed Hall, she once again set off, ruminating as she walked. There were questions about herself she wished she could talk to someone about, even if she wasn’t sure what the questions were, just yet. And while the episode with her mother earlier had calmed her down, she wanted to find out why exactly she was so... uptight about the whole thing. She wanted to know why she just *cared* so much about not-messing-up.

After all, Dad wasn’t even forty yet, and in excellent health. He would be leading Berk and the League for many decades to come, and she could grow and flourish under his guidance and instructions. For the first time anyone could remember, the Archipelago was enjoying widespread peace, and Tribes were slowly getting used to a life without dragon raids, blood feuds, and general violence and chaos. It was the perfect environment to groom a future heir, and like Mom always said, there was no real hurry to get all the Chiefing business down and perfected just yet. She had many years to learn, many more to practice, before she would finally be ready to take on his mantle.

So why had she been so inexplicably *disappointed* in herself? It hadn’t been a superficial disappointment either, one which she could blame on her naturally competitive and over-achieving nature. After she’d gotten out of the Arena, she realized that she didn’t *just* care about how the Meetings went, and how she’d been late or stuttering or what-have-you. It was deeper, darker, more enigmatic than disappointment — an ugly, coiled tangle of inadequacy, of fear, of *urgency*, lurking beneath the guise of perfectionism, which no amount of smiles or reassuring words could truly wash away.

What *was* it? *Why* was she feeling this way?

She was still picking and prodding at pieces of her memory, trying to decipher herself, when she felt her feet take her past a small door at the side of the Hall. There were no torches beyond this point, so she blinked and snapped out of it, and was about to head out again when she realized where she was.

Eight round shields lined the wall ahead, each one with a simple painting of two people — one adult, one adolescent. It documented their history all the way from the dawn of the Viking Age, near three hundred years ago, when Berkhold the Hairybottom landed on the island he would name after himself.

The Hall of the Chieftains.

Zephyr felt her eyes being drawn to the last shield on the wall, the newest one, with paint still
vibrant. It was barely four moons old — painted soon after her coming-of-age ceremony, after her sixteenth name-day. She remembered feeling so proud and so nervous when it had been made, that her mouth and been frozen and her heart beating faster than she ever remembered. In a way, it had been even more important than her coming-of-age, for it symbolized her first forays into the responsibilities she would one day inherit. She remembered feeling a sense of invincibility, almost — an incredible degree of self-assurance, secure in the absolute certainty that she could rise to meet the challenge.

Zephyr squinted at the shield. With whatever sliver of torchlight that managed to pierce through the doorway, she just about made out the contours of her own portrait — like how she held Mom’s battleaxe like a security toy, or how her unruly braids plunged down her front. She scoffed at the girl who believed failure to be impossible. How naive.

She sighed and shifted her gaze to her father, who towered over her, and held himself with the ease and dignity that befitted his status. His great fur cape was draped over his shoulders, and he was looking at her in the portrait, one hand affectionately on her shoulder. He might be tall and thin and not what any of his predecessors had looked, but even now his feats were making their way across the Far Reaches in songs and poems, and his list of epithets was already beyond count.


The Great.

She knew he didn’t like those titles. She could see it in him, when he held audience for emissaries near and far, and they knelt or even prostrated before him in awe and respect. He hid it well, but she could always see the slight shift in his metal leg, the awkward clench of his fists, the eyes that flitted quickly to her mother as if for reassurance.

But he wore those titles like he wore the heavyset fur cape that looked like it weighed more than she did, with the almost-living pattern of a gigantic Night Fury in flight singed onto its backside. He wore them like the circlet he donned when he welcomed another Chieftain to shore, pure dazzling whitegold fashioned with runes and dragons, great wolves and eagles, a symbol of his leadership in the newly-forged League.

That was how he wore his titles. With reluctance, with discomfort… with tremendous grace. They might not fit him, but when he wore them, he grew himself to fit them, and you were convinced there was no one else who could possibly wear them better.

Least of all Zephyr.

Because when it all came down, each and every one of those titles was just another boulder atop the summit of her father’s legacy, piling and piling until she could not ever hope to reach it.

Of course he would step off of that mountain when he was at home or when there were no foreigners on the island, shrugging off the cape to become that cheerful, silly, sarcastic, cuddly, fun-loving, yet sometimes annoying… Daddy, who already loved her with all he had even before she came out of her mother’s womb.

But stepping off the mountain didn’t mean the mountain went away. It was still there; it would always be there. And every year, as more Tribes signed the Wilderwest Treaty, it grew taller, at a faster rate than Zephyr could ever hope to catch up to. And when the day came for her to step on that mountain… she wouldn’t be able to, no matter how many decades she’d had to prepare. The cape and circlet would crush her under their weight, and she would fail him, and the mountain he’d spent
half his life building would fall and crumble to forsaken pieces.

After all, he was the Great… Everything.

And she, his heir, was a Great… Nothing.

Belatedly, she realized that she’d found the solution. This was why she’d been so anxious. This was why she was so terrified of failure, why she couldn’t stand to have any sort of blemish on her record. This was why she’d felt so wretched all throughout this afternoon — had already felt wretched for moons, even if she didn’t know it, from the day her shield got painted. It had never been just about the Chiefdom, like her mother seemed to think.

It had never been about leading Berk.

It had always been about leading the Archipelago.

And, against someone who’d companioned with a Night Fury at fifteen, who’d stopped a war at sixteen, who’d brought peace to the Archipelago at thirty-three… how could she ever, ever hope to catch up?

“Alright,” boomed a voice, “who the Hel left the door — Zephyr?”

Zephyr whirled around, temporarily blinded by the torch the newcomer held in his hands.

“U-uncle Snotlout?”

Here is what I envisioned the shield portrait to look like! For reference, please refer to DW Dragons episode [Portrait of Hiccup as a Buff Young Man].
Chapter End Notes

1. I drew Zephyr & Nuffink as I imagined them. It can be viewed at the end of Ch2, or on my Tumblr. Check it out!
2. As you probably noticed, I also drew the shield portrait! (still a WIP) It is also available on my Tumblr.
3. I ran into several writer’s blocks when doing this chapter. I’m still unsatisfied with how it turned out, and I felt I might’ve muddled Zephyr’s character a little. Let me know
what you guys think! Comments/critiques for my art is also welcome!
I’m sorry! I wanted this to be the last chapter on Berserker, but there were just so many interesting scenes to write and it ballooned, so I split it into two. That being said, I do want to tie things up on Berserker soon, so we can move on with the Plot™ (and yes, there is one).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Are you sure you don’t want some, Brother?”

Finn looked up, bleary-eyed, to see a stout red-haired boy pushing a wooden plate at him. It was laden with boar cutlets and roasted quail, gleaming under the firelight and looking deliciously juicy. His stomach lurched.

“I do want some,” he said miserably. “But I don’t think I can hold it down right now.” The world was still spinning around him, and he moaned. “And don’t call me that,” he protested weakly as he suppressed another gag.

Leif Dagurssen, as per usual, ignored his every word. The boy shoved the plate in front of him, sidled closer on the bench, and said, in an awed whisper:

“So what was it like, Brother? Sailing past the Maw?”

Finn almost winced when he felt Leif’s arm around his shoulder. It’d always felt ridiculous and almost cringe-worthy to be called Brother, but the Berserker boy was impossible to deter. Something about continuing their fathers’ legacies, or some similar yak-dung in that vein. Uncle Dagur certainly didn’t help matters — the man practically beamed at them the first time he’d heard the phrase, and had proceeded to babble excitedly to Dad about how their children were turning out to be just like them. Finn wasn’t so sure he’d like that, even if Leif didn’t throw knives at him.

“I don’t know,” he muttered, too tired to bother with the corrections. “Scary, I guess.” But not as scary as being thrown a dozen times in the air by grown men, he thought glumly. It was the worst form of torture to have a feast you couldn’t stomach. He wish he could switch off his nose, at least!

“Woah, I bet,” Leif said, equal parts adulation and envy. “Father says he’ll let me try after I come of age. Maybe sooner, if I do well.”

“Uh huh,” Finn said. “That’s gre— urghh.” He grimaced as he gulped down the risen bile. “For the love of Thor…”

“I think I can do it sooner,” Leif continued, unfazed. “Don’t you, Brother? I mean, I’m stronger than you.” He reached over and squeezed Finn’s forearm, then nodded, satisfied that it was indeed thinner than his own. Finn rolled his eyes and put his head on the table again.

“You do you, Leif,” he mumbled.

“I will! Thank you, Brother.”
"Wasn’t a compliment."

Leif hadn’t heard him. The boy had grabbed a quail leg from Finn’s plate, and was currently talking animatedly to no one in particular about his own plans for challenging the Maw. He had Aunt Mala’s accent, like his sister, but it sometimes got overpowered by a hint of Uncle Dagur’s accent, especially when he got excited. Grease flew out in droplets as he waved the leg around.

“Leif, stop that,” a girl snapped. Finn snuck a glance diagonally across the table, and saw Sigfrid wiping away at a stain on her leather shirt, a dainty frown on her face. She seemed to sense his gaze, though, and huffed. “And what are you looking at?”

“Nuffink,” Finn said drily.

Leif laughed out loud — the only one who still did, after so many years. Sometimes Finn was a bit worried about the boy’s sense of humor.

Sigfrid looked at them both, clearly disgusted. “You were staring at me,” she said, her eyebrows arching.

“Not my fault you’re right there,” Finn quipped. “Can’t say there’s much to look at, either.”

Her face reddened impressively. “Why you little —”

“Sig,” someone chided with a deep, soft voice. “Finn is our guest.”

The girl turned, her brows twitching in irritation. Seated next to her, and across from Finn, was a handsome young man, with shoulder-length raven-black hair and gentle hazel eyes. His features were delicate — impish, even — and there was something about the angle of his eyes that gave off a somewhat mischievous feel, a trait he’d clearly inherited from his mother.

“Shove it, Larson,” Sigfrid snapped. “Don’t pretend you weren’t hoping for someone else in his seat. I don’t need to spell it, do I? Z-E…”

A delicate rosy color bloomed on Eirik Larson’s pale cheeks, then faded away so fast Finn was unsure if it had been a trick of the firelight. “Finn is our guest,” the young man said again, resolutely, ignoring the statement. “You should treat him with the courtesy he deserves. Plus, he is your own b —”

Finn paled. “Nonono, Eirik —” he began, just as Sigfrid snarled.

“Don’t you dare finish that sentence, Larson!”

The young man held up his hands and cut off his words, a ghost of a smile on his face. He looked between the two of them and shrugged.

“Alright,” he said. “But you really should treat him nicer, Sig.”

“No thanks,” Finn muttered. “I’m treated plenty good.”

Sigfrid all but impaled him with a frigid stare, before she turned away and began to attack her food. Leif looked back and forth between his sister and his definitely-not-brother, as if just catching up to the drama. Then he shrugged and went back to his food as well.

Eirik smiled apologetically at Finn, who shrugged back with the exhausted relief of having barely averted disaster. Eirik was really great and all, but he was just so airy sometimes. One does not
simply mention *that* in front of Sigfrid.

At seventeen, the heir of the Berserkers was tall and well-built, though his learned air suggested a scholar first, and a warrior second. Finn (and Zeph, too) had always liked and respected the older boy. It was hard not to; despite his prodigious talents (being the only person around their age who could give Zeph a run for her gold in the Arena, not to mention learning anything new twice as fast as anyone else), Eirik had always been unfailingly humble and caring to them both, like a big brother who they weren’t exactly *close* to, but who could be counted on nonetheless.

A round of rambunctious laughter drew Finn’s attention. At the center of the Table, about thirty feet away, he saw his father in the seat of honor, raising a mug of mead in an apparent toast. He was flanked on both sides by Uncle Dagur, Aunt Mala, and Aunt Heather, who were in turn flanked by a number of trusted Elders and Councilors of the Berserkers and the Defenders. Everyone was laughing and cheering, evidently at a joke his father had shared.

Things couldn’t be more different in their own section of the feast. As children of noble birth, they were of course expected to sit at the High Table, but ever since the first visit when they were but wee toddlers, they’d been allocated to the far end, out of the way of the adults. The Kiddie’s Corner, as Zeph liked to call it — and at the moment, with Sigfrid in a foul mood, the four of them were an oddly taciturn bunch, picking silently at their plates.

Well, the three of them, rather; Finn was still feeling hints of lingering queasiness, and thought it prudent to not take any chances — throwing up on Sigfrid would probably result in an early trip to Valhalla.

It was in times like these that he felt his sister’s absence the most keenly, like that slightly bewildered sense of loss he got when he’d reach over to grab his trusty forge hammer, only to grasp air.

Okay, maybe that was a horrible analogy and Zeph would punch him if she ever found out, but… He missed her.

Normally *she* would’ve sat in his place, across from Eirik — an heir opposite an heir, as was proper — and would be making merry conversation with everyone around, filling their table with noise. And even if that meant he’d normally have to sit across Sigfrid, the Berserker girl would’ve been too focused on her friendly rivalry with Zeph to pay him any mind. He missed her way with words, how she could diffuse any situation by cracking a joke. He missed how he never needed to talk when she was here to do all the talking for him. And it would certainly have made it less awkward around Sigfrid, especially where that was concerned.

He reached into his coat pocket and thumbed the statue of New Berk she’d given him. The walrus ivory was warm to his touch. He traced his fingertips from the bottom, following the little ridges that he knew were rooftops, until he reached the top where his family stood in front of their home. The gesture had already become familiar to him over the past few days at sea — not that he’d ever admit it to her, of course. It brought him some solace, almost as if she were holding his hand.

Idly, he thought he might as well listen to what the adults were talking about, since his own companions were proving rather boring. He glanced over, and realized with excitement that something was going on — Uncle Dagur had raised his mug, apparently agitated, and was waving his hand vaguely in the direction of the door.

“I’m telling you, this isn’t the normal kind of strange, Brother,” he said loudly, mead splashing out. “This could be *serious.*”

Finn felt his curiosity being piqued. This was no sordid joke or ribald anecdote, nor some boring
affair of diplomacy or governance, which made for typical High Table talk. This sounded interesting.

“They don’t know how to use sails,” Dad replied evenly. “It takes a whole moon for them to get here on their little rafts. They usually have no reason to, either, unless they’ve run out of mead — evidently they’re self-sufficient, because they certainly don’t seem to want anything else we can offer. Maybe they just don’t want to trade this year.”

“Nono, you don’t understand, Hic. The longest we’ve gone without a trade in the past is five moons, and that’s usually during the midwinter months. I was willing to wait that long before telling you, and I have, but it’s summer now, and it’s been a year since they last came. I think something is wrong.”

“As much as I don’t like to admit it, Hiccup Haddock, my husband has a point,” Aunt Mala said, sipping from her tankard, managing to look refined and courtly at a Viking feast. “The Eastwind Tribes have never gone this long without initiating a trade before, and I don’t think it bodes well. Maybe they are in need of our assistance — a storm, famine, a plague…”

“Enemies,” Aunt Heather added.

Dagur rolled his eyes. “You and your wild theories, Heather.”

Dad frowned. “Have you tried sending ships?”

“We did two weeks ago,” Mala answered. “Our ships take a little less than a week to get there. They should be coming back soon, Njord willing. We brought the basics, in case they needed anything — food, water, medicine, mead.”

“Good,” Dad said. “You did the right thing, helping those people. Keep me posted.”

“We will,” Mala said. “Hopefully it’s nothing serious.”

“By Thor, what I wouldn’t give for a few dragons right now,” Dagur grumbled. “Fast and easy, a week’s sailing in a day’s flight. Plus, in the event my sister’s right — not saying she is — I haven’t met any enemy who can win a battle against trained dragons! Ha, those were the days!”

The Chieftain’s last syllable rang across the Table. Finn could literally feel the wave of unease, spreading like ripples in a pond. A few heartbeats later, the chatter died away. Every single pair of eyes seemed to be trained on his father.

“Dragons are not tools of bloodshed,” Dad began slowly. He remained seated, and his voice was quiet and calm, but no one had any trouble hearing his words. “You know how I feel about the issue of sending them away. It had to be done.”

There was another heartbeat’s pause, permeated only by breathing, and slight shifts on wooden seats.

“There is no limit to the greed, the fear, the evil, in power-hungry madmen,” Dad said — almost whispered, even. But then his voice grew stronger. “Set dragons loose, and people will kill them out of fear. Fight others with dragons, and they will want their own. Give them dragons, and they will turn them to war. You, all of you — of all the Tribes, I expected you guys to understand this — Drago, Grimmel, the Warlords —”

“Hiccup Haddock,” Mala said, cutting him off, firm and tense yet still placating. “I apologize on behalf of my husband.” She shot a meaningful glance to the man next to her.

“I’m sorry, Brother,” Dagur said quickly. Finn thought there was even a trace of… trepidation, or at
least sobriety, in his voice. “You know I didn’t mean it that way.”

“I know,” Dad replied simply. He didn’t elaborate, but instead stared at the Night Fury on his shoulder brooch. The surface of his mug was dark and glossy, and his eyes were at once focused and far away. And while he stayed silent, so did them all.

For a few breaths’ time, Finn saw Dad as others saw him — tall and regal with his great cape wrapped around him, firelight reflecting off his green eyes — unsmiling, pensive, frightening even. A quiet strength boiled off him, making men listen, even men like Uncle Dagur; like the spring melt that ran deep beneath the ice, powerful enough to move glaciers.

The High Chief of the League.

Then the moment washed away as Dad clapped Uncle Dagur on the shoulder.

“Sorry, Brother,” he said, as if pulling himself from a dream. “I’m not blaming you for the sentiment — Odin knows I miss those times too, when it took at most a day to get to anywhere in the Archipelago.” His smiled turned into a grin, and Finn felt the entire table let out a collective breath. “Besides, I agree with you — there’s probably no way the Eastwind Tribes are facing enemies. Who is there to fight, that far East?”

Dagur returned the grin, obviously relieved. “Right? Heather seems really convinced, though.”

“You’re just small minded,” Heather chided, equally relieved and eager to pivot.

“Me!” Dagur cried. “Mala dear, back me up here.”

“Why? I think she has a point.”

“Oh, I am betrayed! By my own wife!”

Dad laughed. “So you really think there might be people east of Eastwind?”

“It wouldn’t be out of reason, would it?” Heather said. “Just think about it, Hiccup. Vikings never really sail East, as you know. There may be something — or someone — out in that direction, that we just haven’t found yet.”

Dagur sniggered. “On about the Motherland again? Don’t let her drag you into this fantasy of hers, Brother. You’d never hear the end of it.”

Heather gave him a glare. “I happen to find it very plausible that there should be somewhere we all came from, seeing as every single Tribe we’ve ever met had recited histories tracing back to their arrival here three hundred years ago… and no further. We can’t be the only Vikings in the world, and the world can’t possibly just contain Vikings.”

Mala sipped on her mead. “The Defender Archives do hint at its existence,” she pointed out. “I don’t believe it prudent to dismiss such a claim, as outlandish as it may be. The Archives have yet to be proven wrong.”

“Ach, you and those dusty scrolls, Mala dear,” Dagur said dismissively. “I might as well claim our ancestors to be children of the Aesir, and they first came to the Archipelago by walking the Bifröst. You couldn’t prove me wrong.” He speared a piece of boar with his knife. “Besides, where would it be? Midgard is a disc. It can’t just… go on forever. Another continent full of our ancestors, lying across the sea? It’s crazy!”
“Says the Deranged,” Dad cut in, and everyone chuckled. “But in all seriousness, there’s no way Midgard is a disc. At least not a flat one. The world is a lot bigger than we know. Maybe the Motherland does exist.”

Dagur guffawed and clapped Dad on the shoulder. “Good one, Brother!” he shouted. “You better lay off on any more mead! Midgard, not a disc? Ha!”

Dad shook his head and smiled. “I’m not the only one who thinks this,” he said, gesturing to the women, who were both nodding. He picked up his tankard and marked a slow descent off the edge of the Table. “Consider this: when a ship reaches the horizon, it sinks — disappears, beneath it, you see. And when said ship comes to land —” he brought the tankard back up until it was level again — “the sailors see the tallest peaks first, before the rest of the island. Ergo, Midgard is, at the very least, curved. It’s that simple.”

Dagur’s mouth was agape. He looked to either sides of him, at his wife and sister, and they grinned.

“Don’t tell me you never thought about this, Brother,” Heather said. “You’ve done your fair share of traveling, haven’t you? You had to have noticed the weird stuff the horizon does.”

Finn thought there was a high probability that Uncle Dagur, in fact, simply hadn’t noticed.

“It is the only explanation that makes sense,” Mala agreed. “The Defender Archives have mentioned this. They speak of Midgard as being a curved disk, like an overturned plate, or bowl.”

“Ah!” Dad exclaimed, his green eyes shining with excitement. “That’s where I think your Archives may be wrong, Mala. I have a theory,” he announced. “I don’t know if it’s true, and I’m not sure how to prove it — I have some ideas, mind you, but nothing concrete — but what if, and bear with me… What if Midgard were a sphere?”

The entire High Table fell silent. It was a different kind of silence than the earlier instance — incredulity barely contained, about to break into pandaemonium at any moment.

Finn, too, was at first shocked, but the feeling quickly gave way to a tingle down his spine. As strange as the idea was, he trusted his father; the smartest man alive. If Midgard could be curved, who’s to say it wasn’t a sphere?

This was his favorite side of the man — not the High Chief or leader or Hiccup the Great, but Finn’s own amazing, brilliant Dad, who built things and thought about things and made things nobody ever even knew would be possible. He sat a little straighter in his seat, and held his head a little higher, shivering in anticipation.

“You mean… like a ball?” Mala asked uncertainly, after some time.

“A gigantic ball,” Dad confirmed. “Think about it. The horizons have always existed as far as anyone has sailed, and the horizon is proof for curvature. Who’s to say it doesn’t just… keep existing? So Midgard just keeps curving, until it goes all the way around?”

“I’m really starting to think Dagur slipped you some of his mushrooms,” Heather muttered.

“I confiscated them all,” Mala answered quickly. “Hiccup Haddock, this does not make any sense. It’s one thing to think of a disc with an edge, and quite another to suggest a ball.”

“So that’s where my mushrooms went!” Dagur shouted indignantly. “I’ll find them eventually, Mala dear! You know I will!” He shook his head and turned to Dad. “So… I’m guessing we live on the topside of the ball?” he asked, apparently so far out of his depth that he thought he’d just go along
with the discussion. “The people on the bottom side will just fall off, won’t they?”

“I don’t know, Brother,” Dad confessed. “Like I said, it’s a theory. However, I do think… I do think that we tend to fall toward the center of the sphere, instead of straight down, as it were. So there may well be people living on the so-called ‘bottom’ side, who lead perfectly normal lives. Hel, we may be on the bottom side! What is up or down anymore?”

Heather snorted. “Okay, now that’s preposterous, even for you.”

Finn half-expected his father to show her; to show them all, and pull out some intricate thought experiments complete with numbers to back up his claim. He still remembered when Chieftess Cami of the Bog Burglars had declared it impossible to measure distances accurately across the sea. Dad had spent an entire eykt showing her his inventions, and explaining to her the mathematical concepts of the triangle. Finn wasn’t sure if the Chieftess ever understood all of it, but she certainly seemed impressed in every other way, and gave them no trouble when signing the Treaty.

But this time, his father only smiled and shrugged, even as the High Table churned out a cacophonous explosion of laughter. Calls came from all directions of the Meade Hall — “A bit drunk there, Chief!”, “Lay off the mead, Sir!”, “Some of our Deranged-ness rubbing off on ya?”

Finn’s hands balled into fists. What was Dad doing? He shouldn’t just take all this joking, even if none of them were meant seriously. He just had to go back to being the Serious High Chief, and none of those people would dare to make another peep. And then he can explain his theory, without all this noise and interruption.

Just then Finn felt someone nudge his hand, and, to his surprise, saw that it was Eirik. He was about to tell the older boy to be quiet and wait for his father’s explanation, when Eirik whispered: “Uncle Hiccup is amazing!”

His clear hazel eyes were shining with awe. Finn’s reproach quite simply vanished.

“You… believe him?”

“I don’t know! But that idea is just so… elegant. Has he ever talked to you about this?”

Finn blushed. “Ah — uh, no. It’s probably one of his newer ones,” he added, a touch defensive.

“Well, it’s certainly groundbreaking! And whenever he comes up with ideas, he ends up being right.”

“He does!” Finn exclaimed, high and shrill, instantly warmed to the young man. He blushed and cleared his throat, lowering his tone in order to lend himself a semblance of impartial authority. “Ehhem. I mean, er, I wouldn’t say he’s right all the time, you know? But he does have a pretty good track record at these kinds of things. Just thought I’d point that out.”


The Berserker boy had been scribbling on the Table with grease as ink, his stubby fingers forming symbols in furious torrents. Finn took one glance at the mess and winced — the runes spelled out stuff like ‘Maw’, ‘ship’, ‘rope’, ‘sail’, and ‘coming-of-age’.

“Uhh, that’s why they’re myths, Leif,” Finn replied. “Like Jörmungandr, or the Níðhöggr. Nobody really believes in them.”
Finn snuck another worried glance at the mess of scribbles. He really hoped he wouldn’t get pestered about the Maw for the remainder of his stay — which was rather unlikely, knowing Leif.

“Well I believe in them,” Leif said defiantly. “And I bet Zeph does, too.”

Finn rolled his eyes. “First of all, don’t call her that, that’s only for me. Second, no she doesn’t; she thinks myths are stupid. Third, how come you call me Brother, but don’t call her Sister?”

Leif’s face colored into the shade of his hair. He stammered for a bit before Eirik took pity on him.

“Stop teasing him, Finn. Anyway, I don’t think this theory conflicts at all with the myths, Leif. I mean, it is rather poetic, don’t you think? Midgard, round just like a fruit, hanging on the branches of Yggdrasil…”

There was a childlike, wondrous smile on his face, and Finn felt a flash of pity. Eirik had always been so gentlemanly, and serious, and big-brotherly, it was easy to forget he wasn’t really that much older. Maybe this was how he ought to have been, if he weren’t made heir. Finn couldn’t imagine being heir in his circumstance, anyway; Dad had always thought it a cruel decision on Uncle Dagur’s part, and Finn knew for a fact they’d once argued about it, in private. They had left Berserker Island earlier than expected, that year.

Finn shook his head. It wasn’t his problem to worry about, and right now there were more important things to pay attention to. He nudged Eirik, nodding at the center of the Table, and together they turned back to see if Dad had explained the concept at all.

To his disappointment, the topic of conversation had moved on to other trivial matters of supply. Judging from the smiling faces and residue whispers of laughter, though, Dad hadn’t explained anything, and had instead let his theory fall as a joke.

It left Finn simmering with indignation, even if his father seemed completely unbothered. He really wanted to hear about a spherical Midgard, too, and his father’s evidence for it, which was usually the best part about any new theory or discovery. Maybe he’d ask about it later, or tomorrow after they’ve left the island.

At least it wasn’t all bad, he reasoned to himself. He knew Eirik was sold, or at least fascinated, so that’s something. As for the others, Leif had always been a bit of a boar-head, and Sigfrid —

Finn frowned. What about Sigfrid? She’s been uncharacteristically quiet throughout it all, which was weird since she’d always idolized Dad. He wondered what she would say about this unorthodox theory of his. He turned, maybe to throw a snide comment or two, only to find her seat empty and her plates cleared.

“Oh, typical,” he grumbled to no one in particular. “Leif, where’s your sister?”

Leif blinked and looked up. “I dunno,” he said, shrugging when he noticed the vacancy. “She does that sometimes.” He was about to go back to his scribbling when he smacked himself on the forehead, as if having an epiphany. “Oh, I was so stupid! Brother, I need some tips!”

Finn was suddenly very sorry he hadn’t left the feast when he had the chance.

“Er, why don’t you ask Eirik?” he said lamely. “I mean he’s sailed the Maw before, righ—”

“Eirik didn’t do it by himself,” Leif said, scooting closer. “He had help from Dad.”

“I had help from mine…” Finn squeaked out.
“Your Dad said you didn’t! On the honor of your Clan!”

“… yeah I really wish he didn’t do that.”

“I was also close to seventeen,” Eirik said, a small smile on his face as he clued in to their exchange. “Haven’t broken any records, that’s for sure.”

At this, Leif’s eyes shined even brighter.

“Not helping, Eirik,” Finn groaned. He hunched himself together. He wanted to say no, but Leif was looking at him with so much enthusiasm and pure expectancy that he felt obligated, almost as an older cousin would, and his rebuff snuffed out and died in his throat.

“Well…” he said slowly, mentally sighing. Now that he’d committed himself, the sooner he got this over with, the better. “I guess all I can say is, uh, know your ship? I’d spent a lot of time at sea with my dad and my Uncle Eret, you know. You really have to know your ship and how she reacts, especially under stress…”

Thor, it was going to be a long night.

Chapter End Notes

1. Look, our boi Hiccup isn’t a flat earther!
In all seriousness, though, there is absolutely no historical evidence that the Vikings viewed the world as flat. No sea-faring civilization could miss all the evidence you get from watching ships disappear beneath the horizon. However, they likely didn’t believe it was round, either, as can be glimpsed from their mythology and worldview. All in all, I don’t think they cared all that much what it was like. They were the masters of the sea, and where they had their longships, they were safe, with all horizon spread out before them to explore. That was all that mattered.

2. Yes both of those boys have a crush on Zephyr. Because who wouldn’t?

3. I HC that Finn gets annoyed when someone else calls his big sis Zeph. That’s like, his thing (just like how Zephyr is with ‘Finky’) Everyone else either call her Zephyr, Zeffie, Zee, or Haddock.

4. It hasn’t been made explicit but, what did you guys think about Heather’s pairing? She and Gustav never interacted in the series, but I found it very interesting to explore and write about. Eirik is very interesting to write as well — you guys will find out why he’s the heir instead of Sigfrid, and hopefully see more when we get the next Nuffink-chapter.

5. Dagur’s kids are named in the traditional way: Sigfrid Dagursdóttir and Leif (pronounced Layf, but Dagur calls him Leafy to mess with him) Dagurssen. However, Gustav Larson had been a Berkian before he moved to Berserker, so his son is named Eirik Larson in the Berkian way (notice for example Astrid Hofferson instead of Hoffersdóttir).

6. Thank you to HappyBrainiac43 on AO3 for giving me the idea about Finn and Uncle Eret’s sailing/bonding time! That is definitely something that has happened, and it’s
absolutely beautiful. Unfortunately it can’t be anything more than a brief mention.
Zephyr asked, even as she recognized the stout stature, the horned helmet, and the powerful bulk of his arms.

In the stillness of the Hall of Chieftains, her voice was both too small and too loud.

Snotlout lowered his torch. His angular face and jet black beard jumped into view. His turquoise eyes shined, unusually bright under the flicker.

“What are you doing here, kiddo?” he asked gently. “It’s dinner time.”

Zephyr tried to think of how to answer. She had flooded the room with too much of herself, and right now she felt bare and exposed, even with a person who’s known her all her life. She desperately needed time to reel everything back in, so she could push it down and keep it under lock and key.

“I — uh, came here to admire myself,” she blurted, gesturing at her shield. “Vanity, right? Bad habit, I know.”

The man snorted. “Aye, I know a thing or two about vanity.”

Zephyr smiled, taking up the banter as easy as picking up a shield. “Really, Uncle Snotlout? Who would have thought?”

“Yeah yeah,” he said, shaking his head. “Don’t pretend you haven’t heard stories.”

“Well… Mom did always call you an, uh…”

She trailed off. A few years ago, back when she’d been old enough to have a sharp tongue, but young enough to ignore social decorum, she’d joke around with her Aunt and Uncles without pausing to consider her words. But right now, as Acting Chief, she was all too suddenly aware that she was speaking to more than an Uncle — she was addressing a member of her Council, and her Master of Trade besides. She bit her lip, wondering if she’d gone too far.

“An insufferable, rat-eating son of a half-troll,” Uncle Snotlout finished for her, not missing a beat. A toothy grin poking through his beard, one which Zephyr couldn’t help but return.

“I believe you left out munge-bucket?” she snarked, and the man guffawed.

“An insufferable, rat-eating son of a half-troll,” Uncle Snotlout finished for her, not missing a beat. A toothy grin poking through his beard, one which Zephyr couldn’t help but return.

“I believe you left out munge-bucket?” she snarked, and the man guffawed.

“Of course, how could I forget? Berk’s best-looking munge-bucket! Not even your dad could beat me.”

Zephyr joined in his laughter, her earlier nerves and vulnerability dissolving. It was comfortable, hiding behind words. Words had always been her father’s greatest tools, which he used to foster
laughter, friendship, and alliances, and she liked to think that she, Zephyr the Useless, had at least managed to inherit this one talent, if nothing else.

“So, what brings Berk’s best-looking munge-bucket to the Meade Hall at this hour?” she asked when they’d both recovered from their spell.

Snotlout’s blue eyes twinkled with amusement — a different shade than her own, less of a blue like the clear midsummer sky but richer, like the kind of blue at the edge of the horizon where wind met wave.

“Well, Little Chief,” he began, and Zephyr fully expected another snide comment. But then the man smiled, a quiet, almost melancholic curve of his lips, and she realized the twinkle in his eyes hadn’t been amusement, after all. “I came here to think alone,” he said. “As you did, no doubt.”

She should’ve known Uncle Snotlout would see right through her. Finky might be the closest with Uncle Tuff and Uncle Eret, but Zephyr had always felt a connection with the man in front of her.

“I’m… sorry I intruded,” she offered, a few heartbeats later.

“It’s nothing, kiddo,” Snotlout said. Wordlessly, he turned and walked out of the Hall of the Chieftains, and made a beeline toward one of the pillars. She knew what was there — Hookfang, he called her.

She followed him, unsure if it was the right thing to do. Usually when people went to their dragons on the pillars, everyone gave them a respectful distance to reminisce. The act felt very private, almost like mourning a family member, and even the most jovial of Vikings could turn sour if one handled a dragon sculpture that wasn’t one’s own. But she thought there was something… more, this evening, troubling the man. More than the dragon.

Snotlout didn’t object when she found a seat near him. The Monstrous Nightmare next to him cut an imposing figure in the stone, lines of her scale almost liquid under the torchlight, and he placed his hand on her well-worn snout.

“Hookfang,” he said softly, “I’m sure you remember Zephyr. She’s Hiccup’s get.”

Zephyr didn’t say anything. It wasn’t her place — she’d encroached enough by simply being here.

The man spent some time caressing the dragon’s scales, from snout to head, then chin, neck, and body, all the while muttering under his breath.

Zephyr had seen the different ways people grieved. Uncle Fishlegs seldom visited the pillars, but he carried around a tiny backpack for years until the straps wore out, and he always had his dragon cards with him, tucked into a safe corner of his breast pocket. Auntie Ruff and Uncle Tuff always visited with each other, and only each other, sometimes sitting in silence as they rubbed down the two-headed relief, sometimes cackling maniacally amongst themselves, talking as if they were four people instead of two. And Uncle Eret… well, he was always the most outspoken. He loved telling stories, often grabbing whichever village children who happened to pass by, showing them the majestic scales and horns of his own dragon.

Uncle Snotlout was the most quiet, which used to strike Zephyr as odd. The man always carried himself with such a suave confidence, and a booming voice, that it seemed strange to see him so subdued whenever he tended to his dragon’s sculpture. As she grew older, though, she thought she understood. Perhaps the quiet, thoughtful Uncle Snotlout had always been the most genuine part of him, when he shed the cloak of crass jokes and bombastic words.
And Zephyr could relate to that.

Presently Uncle Snotlout finished rubbing down Hookfang, and straightened up. He turned and almost seemed surprised at Zephyr’s presence, before he smiled.

“Thanks for keeping me company, kiddo,” he said. “You should head home; it’s getting late.”

It was still there, Zephyr saw. Whatever it was that was troubling him. His eyes were calmer now, and happier having spent time with his dragon, but they still had that glint, that extra sheen and twinkle that she belated recognized as barely-contained moisture.

“Why did you guys refuse?” she blurted out.

Snotlout tilted his head, his horned helmet leaning precariously to the side. “Say that again?”

Zephyr was already regretting her question, but soldiered on. “Why did you guys refuse, when Dad offered to bring you? You know… on the trip, to… there?”

“Ah,” Snotlout said, straightening up. He frowned. “Where did this come from, kiddo?”

Zephyr fiddled with her necklace. He waited patiently for her to respond.

It had been the day before their departure. Dad had been talking to the Council, quietly in a corner of the Meade Hall, after a communal feast celebrating the start of sólmánuður. Finky had been busy packing, and she was supposed to go help him, but she’d lingered for a bit, contemplating when to give him the statue for his name day.

That was when she’d overheard Dad saying: “You guys are always welcome to join us.”

To any other bystander, the statement would appear innocent enough. The Chief was simply inviting any of his Council members to come with him on his annual trip to Berserker, and reaffirm the Treaty.

But Zephyr knew better. She’d understood immediately all the implications behind that invitation. Ever since the very first visit ten years ago, their parents had repeatedly stressed the importance of keeping the Hidden World a secret, even to their friends in the village. She and Finky had done a stellar job, treating it like a thrilling game; guarding the family secrets against anyone who would try to take it. They’d had their shares of countless smug glances and knowing smiles, even as they stayed on the sidelines of those occasional debates over the whereabouts of dragons.

She’d naturally assumed that the secret-keeping extended to include all the adults. Even the Councilors. Not that she’d ever asked, but she’d assumed. As far as she was aware, only Great-uncle Gobber and Grandma knew that they’d discovered the Hidden World. Great-uncle Gobber had flat-out refused to come with them, and even Grandma had only visited three times before she refused further visits. Dad told them later that, saying goodbye again, year after year, was making it too hard for her.

So, naturally, Zephyr had been beside herself with excitement after she heard her father’s offer. Her Aunt or one of her Uncles was going to accompany them! And meet their dragons! She’s heard a great deal about them all, of course, and even met two of them however briefly — one year Toothless had brought along Meatlug and Skullcrusher, who’d greeted her parents, but had remained a little timid around her and Finky. Or maybe it was the other way around. The Rumblehorn did look particularly massive to an eight year old child.

She’d always wanted the Council to come. It was painfully clear how much each and every one of
them missed their dragons. She’d smiled at them all, expecting them to say yes without hesitation — expecting all five hands to shoot up in the air, clamoring to go.

Instead, Uncle Eret had smiled, looked around the table, and shook his head.

“Appreciated, Chief,” the man had said, “but we need to watch your back for you.”

“Yeah,” Auntie Ruff had agreed. “Make sure our Little Chief stays out of trouble.”

“Not with you as a shining beacon of feminine influence,” her brother had quipped. “See? Looks like you’ve got no choice, big H. We’re stayin’ behind.”

“Go, Hiccup,” Uncle Fishlegs had finished for them all, gentle as always. “Say hello to… the little one, for me.”

Her father had looked at them all, and even in her peripheral vision, the pang of sorrow and apology on his face had been clear and transparent as snowmelt. Then he’d composed himself, given them a small nod, and departed without saying another word.

The only person who’d stayed silent through it all was Uncle Snotlout. The detail had skipped her notice at the time, but in hindsight — and especially now, standing next to the man in the deserted Meade Hall, with stone dragons all around them — it was all she could think about.

Maybe he’d wanted to say yes, and hadn’t been able to on account of his fellow Councilors. She had no doubt he wanted to go — she’d just witnessed him wipe down Hookfang, for Thor’s sake.

Maybe he’d been angry, at Dad. For keeping the Hidden World a secret from them, and stripping him of the chance to see his dragon again.

Was this why he was upset? Was this why he’d come to the dragons, now of all times?

“Zephyr?”

The man’s armor clinked as he shifted his weight from one foot to another, and with a start Zephyr realized he was still waiting for an answer. What had been the question again? Oh, right.

She breathed out, so completely she could feel her stomach press in against her ribs. Then she took an equally deep breath, willing herself to be brave. It’s only Uncle Snotlout, she told herself.

“I heard him, asking you guys to go,” she admitted in a tiny voice. “And… and earlier, I got the feeling that you’re, uhm, troubled… about something. And I think you really want to go… to… you know, meet them again, and maybe you’re regretting, or angry that Uncle Fish and Eret and Tuff and Auntie Ruff have all refused.”

She willed herself to be steady. She could sense his gaze on her face, so she looked instead at her feet.

“I’m sorry, Uncle Snotlout. I know it’s none of my business, but I thought that maybe… especially with Dad gone and all… maybe you’re so troubled because you, uh, you might be angry… at him?”

She braced herself for the rebuke. It was hardly a Chief’s job to interrogate her Councilors about their… emotions. And even if it were, she didn’t have Dad’s deep camaraderie and friendship with them to back up her efforts. She was sure the man would scold her and tell her to go home, or turn around and just ignore her. Or he might be angry that she’d confronted him. He might even decide to bring the incident up with her mother.
Uncle Snotlout did none of those things. Instead, he laughed.

And what a laugh it was — the flame on his torch actually flickered and wobbled with his breath, and the entire Hall seemed to echo with his bellowing joy. When tears slid down, she saw that they were happy tears; laughing-tears.

“Oh, Zephyr,” he said in between wheezes of breath, “me, angry at Hiccup?” He clapped his thighs and sat down again on a bench close by, doubling over. “Oh, you’re a Haddock alright! Overthinking every little detail, overanalyzing every word!” he shook his head, grinning at her.

It took Zephyr a moment to piece together a coherent response.

“B-but I thought you all wanted to see your dragons? I thought — I thought for sure you would want to go, to…”

“It’s alright, there’s no one here, you can say it — the Hidden World. And yes, we do want to go. Of course we do; all of us. Very, very much.”

“But you just said… but… so… you’re not angry? Not going to the Hidden World… isn’t why you’re… upset?”

“Gods, no!” he waved his hand for emphasis. “We were honored! We are honored! We’re honored that your dad never thought to keep it a secret, at least not from us!” He smiled at her fondly. “This year wasn’t his first offer, you know, to take us there. He offered almost right after you got back from your first visit, and every year ever since. You just happened to witness it this time.”

Zephyr gaped. “Every year? But — but we’d always — we always went alone!”

“Yeah,” Snotlout shrugged. “None of us ever accepted. The first time he offered, ten years ago, we made a decision together… and we’re sticking with it. If we go back, we go back only when we’re absolutely sure our dragons will be safe. We go back not because we want to see them… but because seeing them will no longer bring them any danger.”

“B-but, I don’t understand. You, all of you, and Uncle Fishlegs, Tuff, Auntie Ruff, Uncle Eret… you miss them so much!”

“We do. But we also know they’re safe, together with their friends and families, and well-hidden.” He patted the space beside him, and slowly Zephyr moved to sit herself down. “I’ve been Master of Trade for close to fifteen years, kiddo. I was appointed by your father after your brother was born. I’ve seen and met more people than I ever could have dreamed, during this time.”

He sighed and took off his helmet. Without the massive horns, he looked a lot less intimidating, and frailer than his thirty nine years. With a start Zephyr realized she was already as tall as he was.

“Hiccup’s always been a dreamer,” he continued. “His visions are beautiful, and Berk loves him for it… but he’s an idealist, Zephyr. While he’s been among the Chieftains and leaders, I’ve been among the traders, and farmers, and fishers. I’ve seen the greed and the terror on their faces with my own eyes, even in Tribes that have already joined the League. The Treaty is paperwork, kid, ink on parchment. It doesn’t change the way people think, or how the world works… not overnight.” He shook his head. “The Hidden World is our greatest secret. And the fewer who know of its location, the better. That is why we refused. Do you understand?”

“But you’d never tell anyone!” Zephyr protested hotly. “None of you would ever betray Berk! Ever!”
“Of course we wouldn’t,” Snotlout said soothingly, with a firm nod. “But the world is more dangerous than you think, kid. When people want something badly enough, they will find a way. Take Eret for example. He’s the Master of Sails, and travels as much as I do. You know how he gets when he’s drunk. Hel, you know how I get when I’m drunk. What if someone got us drunk, and managed to coax the secret out of us?” He grinned. “Except, we can’t reveal information we do not have; it’s safer this way, believe me.”

Abruptly he turned away from her, the leather around his forearms taut and creaking from the sudden tense bulge in his biceps. Zephyr couldn’t see his eyes, but when he spoke, he spoke like a whisper to himself.

“Believe me,” he said, hoarse, “I would know.”

At that moment, the man beside her didn’t look like her Uncle Snotlout. Didn’t look like Berk’s Master of Trade, or a fearsome Viking warrior who’d companioned with a Monstrous Nightmare. He just looked… broken.

Zephyr never felt so much like a child than that moment. Her throat felt dry. She felt stupid and useless, and afraid, too. Uncle Snotlout didn’t break. He was… he was there. He was a Councilor! One of the people her Dad trusted the most! He was built like a yak, and could beat Uncle Eret in wrestling (occasionally). He was supposed to be adult, and invincible. If even he broke… what was Zephyr supposed to do?

“Have I ever told you about their mother?”

The question cut through her panic, as unforeseen as it was, and somehow provided enough solid ground for her to stand on. Slowly, as she breathed, she felt her nerves settle.

“Spike and Sniff’s?” she asked, knowing the answer.

“Aye,” he said. When he next spoke, his voice had grown in both volume and tenderness. “Her name was Helga. Helga Brynjarsdóttir. She had blue eyes, like me but much more beautiful, and black hair, also like me, but hers always came with a sheen envied by gods and men. She was taller than I am, too.” He chuckled.

Zephyr knew that much — Spikelout had once told her the name, though under what circumstances she could not recall. Admittedly, she didn’t know much more beyond that; she knew the woman was from a far away Tribe, and that Uncle Snotlout had fallen in love with her on one of his trading trips. Maybe they were married. If they were, it hadn’t been a long one — a few weeks after Finky had been born, Snotlout had come back to New Berk, twins in his arms, alone. Death by childbirth, he’d said, and refused to talk more. Everyone had the good sense to avoid the topic ever since.

So, instead of asking her own questions, she gave him the breadth and time he needed to compose himself. He had began to tap his feet — something so childlike and innocent that Zephyr couldn’t help but smile at.

“We met a few moons before you were born, if I recall,” he continued finally. “I was twenty-two, just barely. My father was Master of Trade back then, and I went with him on his trips. Hiccup had some plans for him, I think, and needed me to take over his duties as soon as I was able.”

Zephyr nodded. She knew Uncle Snotlout’s father was a man named Spitelout, who’d been a great warrior and second-in-command to her grandfather, Stoick. But he’d died of a sickness when she was young, and being so many years ago, few in the village still talked about him. She had no
connection to the man, in any event. He wasn’t a Great-uncle like Gobber was; he was just Uncle Snotlout’s dad, a faceless name in the Tribal Annals.

Uncle Snotlout spoke again. “We met during sólmánuður, funny enough. Her Tribe was a Trader’s Tribe; they wandered the Archipelago, hopping from island to island in their little fleet. They spent almost their entire lives on the sea, sheltering in bays or uninhabited lands when storms or winter drew near. Summers were their busiest days, naturally. They would call to port at Triple Peak, as much of a home for them if they ever had one.”

“Triple Peak?” Zephyr asked, frowning. She knew most of the Archipelago by heart, and by her father’s meticulous maps. She didn’t recall a place called Triple Peak.

“Yes,” Snotlout said, deep in thought. “Everyone called it Trader’s Island whenever the Grand Market was in season. Ha, you should’ve seen the place — stalls and merchants everywhere, from Tribes all across the Archipelago. The entire world went there to bargain, it seemed. You could get some great stuff there… and we Berkians were honored clients, thanks to Hiccup’s reputation.”

The name Trader’s Island was no more familiar to her than Triple Peak, but Zephyr pushed it to the back of her mind. She’d have to consult the maps later, and memorize it this time.

“Reputation?” she asked instead. “Why? What’d Dad do?”

“He got rid of Grimmel and the Warlords in one stroke,” Snotlout said with a snort. “I thought all the kids had that story memorized, you most of all.”

Zephyr blushed as she did the math. “I forgot it was around the same time,” she muttered. Even though story time at home had always glossed over the Exodus Wars (being a touchy subject for Mom and Dad), she and Finky couldn’t exactly pledge ignorance — not with the entire village always willing to fill them in on their parents’ heroics.

“Yup. Anyway, I met her only two years after Grimmel had been vanquished, when the Archipelago still sang our praises.” He grinned. “Not that they don’t now, with the League and all, but that’s a different song.”

Zephyr winced. She certainly needed no reminders on the League, already being hailed as her father’s greatest achievement — and that was saying a lot, for someone like him.

“So you just met her at the Market?” she asked, steering the topic away. “What happened after that?”

A smile passed his lips, and stayed. “Oh, I was instantly smitten. She was nineteen, a spritely age, though a bit old to still be unmarried — not that I had any complaints. We Berkians have always married rather late, for Vikings. I can still remember the day I saw her, standing at her stall, selling yak-dung.”

Zephyr couldn’t help the laughter that bubbled through her nose. “What?”

“You heard me, kiddo! Yak dung is no laughing matter! Very important for crops, as Tuff can tell ya.” His face broke into a grin. “I’ll admit, I was relieved when I learned she was just watching over the stall for her uncle. But even if she sold yak dung the rest of her life, I still would’ve married her.”

His voice had turned gentle again. He had a very good storyteller voice, Zephyr realized; warm and mellow when stripped of the normal harsh edge of pride and strength, and soft like the balmy place next to the hearth. Better than Uncle Tuff, or Uncle Eret, or even Dad, and certainly better than Great-uncle Gobber. She’d forgotten about his storyteller voice.
“So did you marry her?” she asked quietly.

“Heh, I tried, on my second voyage there. You were already born then, and I thought it high time I got my own family started; I was always a bit competitive with your dad. My father wasn’t the most pleased with my efforts — a trader girl is not the right choice for a Jorgensen, he told me. Berk was poised to become the most powerful Tribe of the Archipelago, and Jorgensens were one of its oldest Clans. We had a reputation to uphold.”

He sighed. “Of course, I was young and in love, and didn’t much listen. I demanded we negotiate a suitable bride-price, and rush through it all before summer ended and the Market closed. I was willing to offer just about anything.”

“And what did she say? About all this?”

A sad smile touched his lips, before fading away. “Oh, Zephyr… you’ve grown up on Berk, so you’ve never known any different… but in most places, it wouldn’t have mattered what she’d said.” He thumbed the rim of his helmet, and Zephyr realized the gesture as one of anger. “She wanted to come with me,” he added tersely, “for what it’s worth. But my father refused to pay the bride-price, and so her family refused to let us wed.”

“So… what did you do?” Obviously something came of the romance, or she wouldn’t have such a good sparring partner in Snifflout. She leaned closer. “Did you elope?”

Snotlout looked at her askance. “Those are some mighty dangerous words from our Little Chief. Should Astrid be worried?”

“Nope!” Zephyr said, trying hard not to giggle. “Besides, who would I elope with?”

“Spikelout’s a pretty good lad,” he offered with an impartial air. Zephyr must have made a face, for a heartbeat later he barked out a laugh. “I know, I know, he’s your cousin. Even if he weren’t, none of the lads here make even half a decent match for you. Your future lies across the sea, in great Meade Halls, the worthiest sons of the mightiest Chieftains.”

Zephyr rolled her eyes. “I’m barely sixteen, Uncle Snotlout.” And it might not be sons, she added to herself, before shaking her head to clear her thoughts. “So… if you didn’t elope, what did you do?”

Snotlout sighed. It was one of those long sighs that spoke of forlornness, of regret, of wishing-to-have-known-better. “I did nothing,” he said, with a small shrug. “I was a coward. I could only sneak to her tent after dark, and sing to her, tell her stories. I didn’t dare go against my father’s wishes; I didn’t dare steal her away; I did nothing. And before I knew it, the Market closed, and we left.” He stared at the torch which he’d placed on a sconce nearby.

“I never saw her again.”

Zephyr sputtered. “What?? But what about Spike and Sniff?”

Her reaction seemed to bring him back to his normal self. “Hold your dragons,” he said with a smirk. “I’m not finished.” The moment was short-lived, however, for he turned somber again. He took a shuddering breath.

“The next summer, your brother was born,” he said, and his voice dropped lower than she’d ever remembered hearing. “Everyone was ecstatic. I wanted to meet the boy, so I stayed behind on Berk, and let my father go on the trading trip alone. It was mostly an excuse — I was still bitter about his refusal, but mostly I didn’t want to face Helga. I was afraid of her accusations. I’d been a coward the previous year, who didn’t and couldn’t ask for her hand in marriage. And I knew if I met her again, I
still wouldn’t have the courage. What good would that do? So I stayed behind.”

“But… you ended up going,” Zephyr pointed out. “Everyone said that you were the one who brought back the twins —”

“Yes… I ended up going. You know, when I got the chance to hold your brother, the first thing he did was to smile at me. I guess something moved me, then. I thought to myself, if I were to ever have a boy like this, by the belly of Helga, I could die happy. So off I went. I was determined to win her. To do what it took to make her happy. To make her a part of my family. It wasn’t a long voyage, only three days — but I never… I never arrived.”

His shoulders heaved. When he turned away, Zephyr knew enough to give him the space he needed.

“Sorry, kiddo,” he said with a tight smile, after a moment. “So, where were we?”

“You went to Trader’s Island,” Zephyr reminded him quietly.

“Ah. Yes. So, halfway there, I ran into my father’s ship. It was incredibly lucky — the route there and back was usually different, and only intersected when you had to sail around Scauldron Island. Had I left any later, I probably would’ve missed him.”

“Your father? Why’d he leave the Markets early? They were still in session, weren’t they? And if you did miss him, wouldn’t he just come back to New Berk anyhow?”

A grimace passed on the man’s face. He shuddered and closed his eyes, allowing the pause to stretch into a pregnant silence.

“No, kid,” he said finally, giving her a small, and — even after all these years — painful smile. “You see… My father was dying.”

Zephyr’s mouth dropped open. It wasn’t polite, she knew. But she couldn’t control it.

“Why?” she managed to croak out.

Snotlout tapped his fingers on his helmet, which was sitting on his lap. “Do you know why you haven’t heard of Triple Peak, or Trader’s Island?” he asked. “You must have thought you misremembered the maps, right?”

Zephyr nodded wordlessly, not knowing where he was going with this. She was still confused.

Snotlout snorted. This wasn’t a laughing snort. It was… furious. Murderous, even. He gritted his teeth.

“Well, I’ll tell ya. It’s because it isn’t called Triple Peak or Trader’s Island, not anymore. It has a new name: Oathbreaker Island.”

The pain in his voice was as tangible as Zephyr’s shock. She felt dizzy.

“You mean… the…” her voice wavered and stammered. “The Oath—”

Snotlout nodded. “The Oathbreaker War, yes. The last War we Berkians have ever fought. And part of the reason your father began building the League.”

Zephyr felt a wrenching pang in her chest as her heart broke. Pieces were falling into place, and all of it made sense. The Oathbreaker War had been the greatest conflict in the Archipelago since Grimmel’s demise, and it had all started… because the Oathbreaker Tribe had managed to gain
information on the Hidden World. The written histories were all vague on this point, but this much was certain: someone on Berk had been tricked, by one of the Oathbreakers, into revealing that the dragons had gone West. The Tribe had then gathered their best trappers and hunters, and had even attempted to kidnap the Berkian, to use him to train their eventual captive beasts. They’d mustered a fleet, and planned to scour the Archipelago for any remaining nests, hopefully without raising attention, until they possessed enough strength to challenge Berkian supremacy.

Through a sheer stroke of luck, their plan was found out. The histories were vague on this point as well, but the results were clear. Her father, her peaceful, funny, silly Dad… had been left with no other choice. A moon after Finky’s naming ceremony, he’d called on Berk’s allies, and declared War.

And as summer drew to a close, the fleets of Berk and her allies had descended jointly upon the unsuspecting island, and wiped the Oathbreakers off the face of their maps.

She’d always treated the tale with indifference. She didn’t like stories of war and ruin, especially if they were the ones doing the ruining. But her father had insisted that they learn from their mistakes, and the story had been passed down. It was one of her least favorite ones, due in no small part to her father’s obvious pain when it was discussed. He hadn’t wanted War. He had tried peace. But peace had failed, and he had blood on his hands.

Never did she suspect the Oathbreakers to be mere harmless traders before their turn.

Never did she suspect ‘the cunning Oathbreaker’ in the stories… to be Spike and Sniff’s mother.

And never, ever would she suspect ‘the tricked Berkian’… to be her Uncle Snotlout.

They were quiet for a long time after that. Zephyr just focused on breathing, one breath after another. On the sconce, the torch burned ever strong, casting their faces in strange orange shapes.

“She never meant to trick me,” Uncle Snotlout croaked out, finally. “I’d been young, and eager to impress. I’d told her so many stories, and yes, I’d told her where our dragons went. But her Clan had coaxed those stories out of her. They’d always known who I was, who the Jorgensens were… what Berk and Hiccup had done. And when the twins had been born — out of wedlock, bastards in her Tribe — she had begged for her Clan to take them in.”

“Why didn’t they?” Zephyr whispered, almost afraid of the answer.

“Because they asked her to drug me, the next time I visited. To keep me against my will on their island, so I could train their dragons. She refused, and was beaten. And then, when my father arrived that year… if not for Helga, we’d have never known of the plot before it was too late.”

Somehow he could speak easier now, as if the events were someone else’s story, of no consequence to himself. His voice had lost its storyteller timbre, and now sounded monotonous and bland. Dead, even. He breathed in and continued.

“It was a close thing, you know. She was kept under lock and key in anticipation of my arrival, and risked her life getting the information to my father. He, in turn, risked his life to save her and my children… his grandchildren. He’d almost succeeded, too, but the Oathbreakers caught him out. In the end, she was slain by her Clan… her own kin, in front of his eyes. He wasn’t unscathed, either, and took an arrow meant for the twins before he got away. By the time I found him, the rot had spread, and there was no hope. He barely had breath left to tell me of their plot, and lost consciousness after naming the twins. I lit his ship on fire and made my way back to New Berk.”
Only once he finished his tale did tears begin to come forth. Big pearlescent ones, beading at the corner of his eyes, sliding down before being absorbed by the thick beard on his cheeks.

Hesitantly, Zephyr inched closer. She hadn’t done this since she was a kid, but…

She turned and wrapped him in her arms. Her Uncle Snotlout, who was always the suave Uncle, the cool Uncle, bringing back all sorts of trinkets and gifts from overseas, and all the best stories one could ever want.

Her Uncle Snotlout, who broke down in front of her, and poured his grief into her cloak.

Later, when they were finally ready to leave the Meade Hall, he paused at the great oaken doors, and smiled at her. He’d put his helmet back on again, but their eyes were the same level.

“You’re just like him,” he said, studying her, torch in hand. “You know that, kiddo?”

Zephyr didn’t know what he meant.

“Hiccup,” he clarified. “I… I went to him first, you know, the first time, and… later, after the War, when we had time to hold proper funerals. He listened. Like you did. Then he hugged me, like you did, and let me cry.” He gave her a rueful grin. “Seems I just can’t keep my composure around you Haddocks.”

“Well,” Zephyr said, her throat tight, “you know what he always says. A Chief takes care of their own.”

“Right, kiddo. I’m sorry — I’m your Uncle, and I should be the one offering advice, not the other way around. You must have come to the Meade Hall because something was on your mind, too. I can’t help you with it… but I can say this: you’re going to be a great Chief.”

He pushed the door open. Outside, the sun was still up, outlining his silhouette against the crack.

“After all, you already are.”

Chapter End Notes

1. I loved writing this chapter! It’s very long, but I couldn’t cut any part of it out. I hope this it sheds some light on how the Gang viewed and dealt with the dragons leaving, and why they haven’t gone with the Haddocks to the Hidden World. I also really wanted to explore the old gen with the young gen; we got Finn with the Berserker gang, so this one is about Zeph with (of all people) Snotlout! I think he’s an overlooked character who is a huge softie for kids (and you can bet he will never enforce his standards of masculinity/achievement on his own kids like Spitelout did on him). I don’t know what happened, but he ended up with a really sad backstory… Sorry?

2. I envision Snotlout as having an actual close relationship with Hiccup, after their respective kids are born. They’re brought together through the events of the Oathbreaker War, certainly, but there’s another layer to that, which has to do with Nuffink, which we’ll hopefully see in the next Zephyr-chapter.

3. The Councilors are as follows: Astrid is Chieftess and Master of War (military
matters, training recruits). **Fishlegs** is **Master of Books** (domestic matters, finance). **Snotlout** is **Master of Trade** (trade & foreign relations). **Eret** is **Master of Sails** (shipbuilding & maintenance). **Tuffnut** is **Master of Fields** (farming & animals & leather-making). **Ruffnut** is **Master of Nets** (fishing & rope-making & cloth-making). **Gobber** is **Master of the Forge**, but he rarely attends Meetings. **Valka** is **Chief-Mother**, and though she doesn’t have a title, she serves as an advisor for all of them.

I hope you enjoyed reading as much as I did writing, and please comment/review! Special thanks to Canon Archives on FFN for their amazing and awesome encouragements.
A Firstborn's Plea

Chapter Notes

I have a question for all of you, and it’s one that has sort of bothered me for a while: do you mind when the Gang uses slang terms like aye/nae/lad/lass?

The majority of the Gang are voiced by American/Canadian talents, so if you read their dialogue in their original voices, these local slang terms would sound very weird. However, at the same time it feels sort of natural? In any event, I’ve purged the term ‘lass’ from the last chapter for now, but I’m interested to hear your thoughts.

EDIT: There is a TV Tropes page for this fic, by FFN user WikiSorceror! Check it out!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Finn breathed out as he rounded the stairs to the top of Berserker’s Heart. It wasn’t a tall mountain by any measure, but the rock faces were sheer and wind-swept and nigh-impregnable, and looked like they could survive Ragnarök itself. He could see why the Berserkers had chosen it to house their Meade Hall, however many generations ago. From below, he could still hear traces of song and laughter on the wind, interspersed by his footfalls on the roughly hewn steps.

It had taken him all of his considerable skills at sarcasm and pointed answers before Leif had finally stopped interrogating him. He felt a bit bad about escaping, but the younger boy had already asked every possible question — thrice — and there truly was nothing Finn could tell him anymore.

Honestly, how many ways can someone rephrase the sentence, ‘know your ship’?

He breathed in a great gulp of fresh air. Spread out before him was the entire west side of the island, forests and fields and farmland and docks, and the Bay before him glittering with shards of sun. It was close to midnight, he reckoned — the sun hung a finger’s breadth above the horizon, splashing down buckets of perpetual twilight, swirling purples and oranges that were every dye maker’s dream.

The Maw was almost directly ahead. Finn smiled when he saw the narrow pass, the sea as tumultuous now as it had been when he’d sailed through. He wondered what it would be like not to sail, but to soar through the Maw — her scales warm beneath him, rock stacks approaching faster than imaginable, wind like blades on their faces. Gods, what a feeling that must be.

Whirrr, came a sound from behind him.

Finn jumped and spun around. Fifteen feet away from him, at the top of a smooth rock, sat Sigfrid Dagursdóttir; expressionless, a whetstone in her hand, an imposing poleaxe balanced across her lap.

Finn’s stomach sank. He couldn’t believe it! How on Midgard had he missed her?

Neither of them said a word. Whirr went the whetstone, a smooth stroke across the sharp edge of the blade. Finn gulped in spite of himself. He wished he’d brought his sword — not that Sigfrid would hurt him (much), but he could really appreciate the extra boost of security right about now. Besides, having a weapon would at least tilt the balance of power a little bit in his favor — he wasn’t too shabby with a sword, or so everyone said (he was better than Zeph at swords; that was something,
The skeins of their shared histories hung between them, pulling at them like the receding tide. Sigfrid brought her whetstone down in yet another stroke, but the *Whirr* this time wasn’t quite as clear or steady as the previous.

Well, at least he wasn’t the only one affected by this awkwardness. That was comforting to know.

All the same, she was resolute in her silence. Finn didn’t want to leave — this was such a great spot, and the breeze was superb, and why should *he* be the one to leave? It would almost look like he *lost* to her, or something!

But there was no way he could enjoy the scenery with her here, *Whirring* away on her stupid poleaxe, and he didn’t fancy getting himself into another needless argument anyway.

He sighed.

“… so uh, I guess I’ll go,” he offered, magnanimous and defeated at the same time. It was clear she had no intention of acknowledging his presence, but still he paused for a heartbeat or two, almost hoping for a response.

He caught himself and felt instantly disgusted. This was *Sigfrid* they were talking about. Why would he even want a response, when all they ever did recently was argue? He puffed and turned on his heels.

“I envy you,” he heard her say, low and soft and almost gentle — none of which were adjectives typically associated with her.

Finn froze. His brain must have froze, too, and it was all he could do to turned himself around, stiff as an old man.

Sigfrid hadn’t moved from her place on the rock. She’d put down the whetstone, and he found her staring straight at him, an inscrutable look on her face. Not that she was very scrutable under normal circumstances, but still.

“What?” Finn said stupidly.

“I envy you.” She was still staring at him. Her brows crinkled. “Look at you. You have no idea.”

“No idea? No idea… what?”

Gods, why did he have to *repeat* everything? He sounded like a halfwit.

“No idea how lucky you are.” Sigfrid ignored his stammer. “Honestly, it *annoys* me.”

Finn didn’t know what she was getting at. Granted, he *did* feel pretty lucky, not about particular things but about his life in general — he had a family he loved, Aunts and Uncles who adored him, and a village he was proud of. He had a friend waiting for him across the sea, and they would go flying again in a few days.

But obviously she’d meant none of those things.

“Well, a *lot* of stuff annoy you,” he pointed out after a moment, finally getting his groove back. “So that’s nothing new.”

Sigfrid’s frown deepened into an almost-scowl. “Let me rephrase that: *you* annoy me.”
Finn shrugged. “That’s nothing new either. And it goes both ways, just so you know.”

He expected an immediate retort. They’d sparred words often enough, ever since two years ago, and it was almost second-nature by this point. When she said nothing, however, he squinted at her suspiciously.

“What’s the matter? Terrible Terror got your tongue?”

She ignored him. Suddenly, she pushed the poleaxe off her thighs with a near-violent thrust of her arms. The weapon landed on the ground with a clang, its meticulously sharpened edge probably already dulled by the impact. She paid it no mind, and instead stared at the sea in front of her, eyes almost closed.

“You’re secondborn,” she said finally. “You’re not… you would never be heir, unless Zephyr gave it up. That’s why you’re so lucky.”

Finn was confused. She was especially good at throwing him off his rhythm tonight. “I think I lucked out, too,” he said slowly, trying to puzzle out her meaning. “I mean, I’m obviously no good at all the Chiefing stuff, so it’s great that I have Zeph. But Sig… last I checked, you aren’t heir, either.”

Sigfrid rolled her eyes, short fiery hair almost aglow in the midnight sun. “Yes. How observant of you, Haddock.”

“I’m only pointing it out, cause you seem to have forgotten. I mean, we’re in the same situation, so what’s there to envy? You lucked out too; Eirik is —”

“Not my father’s firstborn,” Sigfrid snapped. Finn could almost see as the frost enveloped her, white tendrils turning her stiff and frigid, like clothes left out during Yule. “I am.”

Finn frowned for a few heartbeats before he got it. His mouth dropped into a gape.

“Wait. You actually want to be heir?”

“It is my birthright.” Her tone was still glacial.

“What? Since when?” He caught her piercing gaze, and hastened to clarify: “I meant, since when do you care who’s heir?”

This had her stumped for a moment. Then her nostrils flared. “That’s hardly your business,” she said haughtily.

“No, but it’s obviously Eirik’s business,” Finn retorted. “Honestly, you guys are cousins!”

“So?”

“So!? Cousins are supposed to be close!”

“Speak for yourself, Haddock,” she scoffed. “It’s not as if you don’t have cousins.”

Finn blinked, then shuffled his feet guiltily.

“Eirik’s different than Spikelout,” he muttered. “And anyway, this isn’t about me. You and Eirik got along well in the past, didn’t you? Why do you want to usurp him all of a sudden?”

She shrank back, offended. “I’m not going to usurp him! Can’t I express my opinions on his position?”
“But why? He’s never done anything but be like a big brother to you — to all of us, really. This seems rather low.”

For a too-brief moment, Finn could swear he saw a crack in her perfect demeanor, like a breath of spring in the middle of winter, gone too quick before one could ever be sure. But then she closed herself off again.

“Because it’s proper. What right does he have, to be heir?” She took a breath, then said, quick and contemptuous as if hurrying to get the words out before losing her courage: “He’s not a Berserker.”

Finn simply stared at her as his mind registered her meaning. She refused to meet his gaze.

“How could you say that?” he asked finally, indignant and hurt on his friend’s behalf. “He’s Aunt Heather’s only son; as much a Berserker as you or Leif!”

“No,” Sigfrid spat out. “He may have Berserker blood, but he’s not a Berserker. He’s a Larson, for Thor’s sake, or not even one.”

The sudden bitterness in her voice left Finn at a loss. What could he say in response to this? What could he do? Yeah, she’d been giving him the cold shoulder for the past two years, but he was used to that. She’d always just been brusque in the past, too, and never like she was right now — never full of this much spite and malice, treading a line perilously close to hatred.

So he just stood there and sort of gaped at her, and they remained mute as the summit winds ruffled their hairs.

In retrospect, Finn had an inkling of her next remark. It was something he’d always been aware of, though never given much thought about. When he was younger, he used to dismiss it as people being silly; it didn’t change who Eirik was, and he’d thought it ridiculous that people would judge someone based solely off a single denomination. His own family, for one, would never do something so… wrong.

But as he grew older, he became gradually aware — sometimes unpleasantly — of the way other people thought about the issue. To them, it seemed there existed no greater dishonor. Even on Berk he could occasionally see the side-eyes, the whispers, the small distance people gave his two cousins. It opened his eyes to the hidden struggle they must all have faced, and he admired Eirik (and his cousins too, if grudgingly) all the more for it.

He just never thought that Sigfrid would be one of… those people. In fact, he hadn’t even considered the possibility before today. She would never stoop so low, or so he’d believed, especially not against her own kin. And so, when her words finally came, it blindsided him; knocking his breath out like a savage punch.

“…He’s a bastard.”

Her voice was small yet fierce, and her gaze was emerald fire, full of guilt and defiance and hurt. He was still gaping at her, but he felt his heart wrench. This wasn’t… her. This wasn’t the Sigfrid he’d known and annoyed for most of his life. This was a different person, and even though they’d never been close, exactly, he didn’t like this new person in front of him, this stranger. He wanted the old Sigfrid back.

“You shouldn’t… shouldn’t talk like that,” he croaked finally. “That’s an ugly word.”

“Why do you care?” Sigfrid snapped. “Besides, I’m not wrong, am I?”
“He was made legitimate,” Finn protested, feeling the heat in his words. “Uncle Dagur —”

“Don’t start,” she warned, suddenly almost snarling. “And he’s not legitimate, no matter what my father may think. He’s sired by an outsider. A Berkian!”

Finn felt his pulse surge, embers of annoyance coaxed into flames of anger, a retaliation for her swift belligerence and the disdain with which she’d mentioned his home. He rarely ever got angry, being generally cheerful and mild-mannered, but right now, his hammering heartbeat was almost a relief. Because as ugly as it was, the anger was… there. It could be counted on. It gave him something to hold onto — enabled him to fight.

“Uncle Gustav moved here ever since he was your age,” he snapped back, harnessing the strength of that fire. “How is he an outsider?”

“Uncle Gustav,” Sigfrid said in disgust. “Call him what you like, but that man is no uncle of mine.”

“Him and Aunt Heather were going to marry!”

“They never did! They were barely engaged, for Thor’s sake!”

Finn trembled. “The only reason they didn’t marry,” he said, biting down on each syllable, “was because he died. saving. your. Tribe.”

The fury in his voice seemed to give her pause. Perhaps she was unused to hearing him like this, when he was usually so chipper, or maybe the truth in his retort had struck a chord. Finn panted as he glared at her, and for an incredible moment he thought he saw her glacial exterior melting; a twitch of regret at the corner of her mouth, or maybe a flash of guilt in her sea-green eyes. She seemed to teeter on that edge for more than a few heartbeats. By now he was sure of the turmoil on her face, closer to the Sigfrid he had known growing up…

But the air between them was too charged with savagery and wrath, and the moment was gone. She frosted over, her body stiffening as she haunched, her eyes blazing like emerald fire.

“So what if he died?” she shot back. “Don’t think for one heartbeat that, just because you’re my betrothed, you can come in and lecture me, Haddock, because I’ll not tolerate —”

Finn exploded. “You think I want to marry you?” He was shaking, almost vibrating with rage, more than he’d ever felt his entire life. “Every sane person in the entirety of Midgard would want nothing to do with you!”

“Ohoh, you’re one to talk, Mister I-want-Nuffink-to-do-with-you.” She drawled out the syllables, and Finn’s vision swam. He couldn’t believe he’d been so careless in his word choice. “See? Even your —”

“Say another word, and I’ll tell Uncle Dagur and Aunt Heather what you said about Eirik,” he seethed, wrestling back control. “And for the record, I’m glad they didn’t make you heir. You’re nothing compared to him.”

Sigfrid’s cheeks paled for a moment, and Finn felt an unnatural vindictive satisfaction. The moment didn’t last long, however, as color returned and she gritted her teeth, doubling down.

“My father didn’t even change his decision until I was seven,” the girl hissed. “Sure, he never confirmed it, but before then, I was the one being raised and groomed as heir. I was even given a boy’s name, Sigfrid, like your sister —”
Finn growled. “Leave her out of it!”

“I was the one who was meant to lead with her,” Sigfrid said, ignoring him. “Under our leadership, Berk and Berserker would have prospered, together! We would’ve been sisters in arms —”

“Zeph would never want a sister like you!” Finn shouted. “Look at you, Sig! Why do you care about the Chiefdom so much, anyway? Why does it matter to you so much, that you’d say such horrible things about Eirik; about Uncle Gustav? Is that really how you see them? I just — you used to joke and play games with us, remember? Is it… is it so important to you… who gets to lead?”

His voice broke by the end of the sentence. All of the anger earlier somehow disappeared, drained out of his tone and heart. Instead, he just felt weary and depleted. She hadn’t always been like this. Hel, even last year she’d only been standoffish and… not full of hate. They used to play together, all of them, and Eirik too, not that many years ago. Finn didn’t understand. It was as if she had grown overnight and left him in the dust, and all those ugly, adult emotions, they took her over and changed her.

He hated this; hated the person she’d so suddenly become, hated how she brimmed with so much jealousy and contempt. It didn’t even have anything to do with the ridiculous betrothal — sure they’ve done their best to ignore each other ever since the announcement — but…

She was his… friend.

Maybe they hadn’t been conventional friends (even before the betrothal), but he still considered her one nonetheless. And it hurt to watch a friend fall.

Finn blinked furiously, pushing back the pressure behind his eyes, wishing once again for his sister. If Zeph were here, she’d know exactly what to say. She’d have some clever anecdote, or talk about how they didn’t really like their own cousins either, or crack some funny joke to make them all laugh. She’d be able to talk Sigfrid out of this… this delusion, and everything would be alright again.

But he wasn’t her sister. He didn’t have her talents: not in fighting, not in talking, not in leading, and generally not in anything else she happened to put her mind to. It had suited him just fine; he was used to being the lesser child, the mediocre child, the second child. He was used to letting Zeph take the center stage — all the easier for him to sneak away when all eyes were on her, right?

At this moment, though, he truly hated how despicably helpless he was. He could do nothing, could offer nothing, could say nothing.

Then again, Sigfrid had been right — he was Nothing, after all.

The Berserker girl had given no answer. She no longer seemed angry, either, nor half-crazed like she’d been a moment before. Now, she was just hunched and silent and emotionless, looking as young as Finn felt. Her short red hair barely moved with the breeze, less like fire and more like grass; fading, wilting, defeated.

With both of them quiet, the din of the Meade Hall reached them in bouts. The feast was evidently nowhere near its conclusion. Finn wished he’d never left. He would have endured Leif’s interrogation tenfold, if it meant he wouldn’t know about… this. He shuffled a little closer, and together they listened to whatever bits and pieces of bawdy song they could glimpse.

“Can you at least… tell me why?” he managed to ask, his voice raspy. He took a breath and tried again. “Tell me… why you changed?”

Sigfrid looked up at him and bit her lip. For a moment, had he not known better, he would’ve
thought she was close to tears.

“I can’t, Finn,” she whispered, and he nearly jumped — she hadn’t called him by that name since gods-know how long ago. “It’s too much.”

“Oh,” he said. His throat felt parched. “Then — then please at least tell me one thing. Eirik… do you really hate him?”

He almost dreaded her answer, but then she bit her lip, and Finn was sure there were tears surging up to the surface, just barely kept under control.

“No, I don’t,” she choked out. “Of course I don’t. He’s my cousin, and like my big brother, and he’s always been there for me. How could I hate him?” She drew a shuddering breath. “I… I love him.”

Finn stepped closer to her. “Then why?” he asked, low. “Why did you say those things?”

She looked at him like she was being asked for a part of her soul. “I can’t, Finn,” she said again, truly contrite. “It’s just… I am… it’s too many things, all at once. I couldn’t explain. You wouldn’t understand.”

“I’m willing to try,” he said firmly. “You’re… uh… you’re my friend, Sig. Or, or at least I consider you one, even with the betrothal and all that. And I don’t like to see you so… different, I guess…” he trailed off, not knowing what else to say.

There was a few heartbeats where both of them were silent. Then, trembling, Sigfrid inhaled.

“You’re my friend, too, Finn,” she said hoarsely, almost too quiet to hear. “Even though I haven’t been treating you like one… you’re my friend.” She sucked in another gulp of air, steadying herself.

Finn tried not to stare, but at this moment, with the midnight sun pouring on her face, she seemed softer than she’d ever been, with her hair alive and aflame once more. He might be mistaken, but he thought he saw a faint glow about her cheeks.

“Finn,” she said again, and he snapped out of the small trance he’d fallen into. When he refocused, he found that their eyes were locked.

“If… I tell you, will you promise not to judge me?” her question was a susurrus of uncertainty.

He didn’t understand, but he saw her sea-green eyes, full of doubt and apprehension and… fear. She wasn’t just uncertain… she was frightened.

Instinctively, he reached out a hand and clasped her on her knee. She flinched at first, but he stared into her eyes like she had into his, and tried to convey how much he cared.

“I promise,” he breathed.

It was a few more heartbeats before she relaxed.

“I trust you,” she nodded solemnly. “And it would be nice to not have to hide, at least not from you.”

She drew a deep breath. “Anyway… I am… I like… Oh, gods. I suppose I’ll just say it: I’m attracted to women.”

Instantly she hung her head, her cheeks flushed, eyes darting as she waited for his response.

Finn frowned, waiting for more revelations, but apparently that was the bulk of her confessions.
“Wait,” he blurted, “that’s it?”

Her arms stiffened. “What do you mean, ‘that’s it’?”, she said as her head snapped up. “I swear, if this is all some great joke to you—”

“No no, Sig!” Finn said, belatedly realizing how insensitive he’s been. “Sorry, that sounded wrong. But, uh, it’s not… Okay, let’s put it this way. Do you know my Uncle Eret? I told you about him — the one who taught me how to sail?”

She paused for a bit, as if deciding whether or not to humor him, then nodded.

Finn hurried on, stumbling over his words before her temper could erupt again. “Yeah, so he’s with — well, it’s not marriage exactly but — anyway he’s with my Uncle Tuff. They’ve been together since before I was born. You know, my Uncle Tuff? The one who gave me this?”

He tugged his necklace out of his tunic to show her. It had been crafted with some of Barf and Belch’s discarded teeth, with the serrated edge long since worn smooth and glossy, almost enough to serve as a mirror.

“Oh.” Sigfrid said, obviously recognizing the item — he’d worn it ever since he was three, after all. Tentatively, she reached out a hand to trace the pearlescent face of the teeth. Finn tried hard not to fidget: nobody really touched his necklace aside from Mom and Dad and Zeph, so the gesture felt both bold and intimate. Still, he didn’t budge; he owed her at least that much, he reckoned.

She withdrew her hand after a few heartbeats. “I never knew — your Uncles were…”

“Yeah,” he said, scratching his head. “I mean, they’re my two favorite Uncles, so I guess it’s just been so normal to me and Zeph that we never… mentioned it? The point is, I would never judge anyone based on who they like.” He gave her a sheepish grin. “I’m sorry I made you panic; I was trying to see if you had more to add, but I said the wrong thing, I guess.”

Sigfrid flushed. “No, I — I overreacted. I’ve never told anyone here. I was nervous.” She gave him an apologetic shrug. “So, those Uncles of yours… they live… openly? Like this? And they’re on your Council?” Her voice was still small and timid, but it had an edge of hope.

Finn nodded. “Why wouldn’t they? It would be so lousy if they had to hide it from everyone, and sneak around — they care for each other, so no one else ought to have anything to say about it, you know? There used to be some older people in the village who were rude about it, but Dad and the rest of the Council gave them a piece of their mind. I also figured, if it could happen to men, it could probably happen to women, so… I’m glad you told me, Sig.”

“I’m glad I told you, too,” she replied. Then she sighed. “You wanted to know why I was so… interested in the Chiefdom all of a sudden, right?”

Finn’s mouth dropped open. “Oh. Right.” He’d forgotten about that.

Sigfrid gave him a small smile. “Well, now that I’ve told you I like girls, I suppose it’s a bit easier to tell you… the rest of the story.” She looked at him, flushed, then looked away. “So… last summer, I kissed your sister —”

Finn choked on his own spit. “You WHAT?”

“Yes. Well, I’ve always wanted to do it, but it wasn’t until last year that she… really picked up on it, I think. I was the one who initiated, but she seemed to like it, and before long we couldn’t get enough — hey, Finn, are you alright?”
He had started coughing sometime during her sentence. “I’m fine,” he said weakly, waving her on before another bout took him. “Just working my way through a healthy dose of sibling betrayal.”

She eyed him strangely. “What?”

He sighed. “Never mind me. Just… go on.”

“Well, if you say so. Anyway, we kissed and, uh… it was a very nice few days.” She blushed again. “A-after you guys left… I began writing letters to her. And, yeah, she began writing back.”

Finn threw up his hands. “Unbelievable,” he said. “You two have been dating for a whole year — a whole year! — and somebody couldn’t have bothered to mention it to her little brother. Gods, this is worse than betrayal; this is treason!”

Sigfrid shook her head. “I wouldn’t call it dating, exactly — it’s not like we could go see each other…”

“Oh for Thor’s sake Sig, you were writing love letters. Love letters! That’s dating!” Finn picked at some patches of lichen by his foot, disgruntled. “Ugh, I swear, I am not cooking anything for her for the rest of the year.”

There was a bleak, unbridled heartbreak, that emanated form her posture. Or at least Finn assumed it was heartbreak; he’d never even fancied someone before, so he wouldn’t know what it felt like. But that didn’t stop him from seeing the signs of… torment, inside Sigfrid — Her back was arched and defensive, desolate yet near bristling with emotion. It was at once the most guarded and most open he had ever seen her. All of his hurt earlier over Zeph got pushed back, shelved away as he witnessed his friend’s anguish.

“I’m sorry,” he offered timidly. “What… uh, what happened?”

“I was hoping you could tell me,” she quipped, but then the taut line of her shoulders rounded. “It was three moons ago now. She kind of just… told me she wouldn’t be coming this year, and… that we shouldn’t kiss anymore even if we met up the next year.”

Finn thought back to how his sister had been behaving over the past three moons, and found himself coming up with nothing. She had seemed perfectly normal, as far as he could tell, if only a bit short-tempered from time to time. Frustration seeped in like the effluvium of a dozen villages. He really thought he knew her better than this — and it stung (pretty badly, if he had to admit) that she didn’t come to him when she needed to talk. He’d always done the same, but maybe she didn’t think him capable of offering good advice. He sighed. What an observant brother he was proving to be.

“I don’t recall anything weird with her,” he admitted to Sigfrid, his cheeks burning a bit. “Did you at least write back to ask her why?”

She rolled her eyes. “Of course I did. I was frantic; terrified, even. I thought I’d done something wrong. It was entirely out of the blue — the letter we’d exchanged before that had been very typical. There was certainly no sign that she regretted kissing me, or that she hadn’t planned on doing more, the next time we got together.”

“And? What did she say?”
“Only airy promises and vague justifications,” Sigfrid replied, low and fast and increasingly fierce, leather-clad arms waving animatedly at no one. “The first thing on the letter was some yak-bollocks point about responsibility. Like being a Chief to her people, and how Chiefs were supposed marry for the good of their Tribe, and produce an heir.” Her face twisted in distaste. “By the gods, we’re sixteen! Nobody needs to think that far ahead. Then she went off on how women couldn’t marry each other — not because it’s wrong, but because it just isn’t heard of, especially for Chieftains. Even the Bog Burglars and Wingmaidens don’t do marriage, she said, and they’re all women. Gods, who said anything about marriage? I don’t want marriage!”

“I beg to differ,” Finn said drily, which earned him a glare.

“You know what I mean! I didn’t kiss her because I was planning to marry her. I kissed her because I liked her, and wanted to kiss her. And none of that matters now, because she…”

Sigfrid trailed off and winced. She closed her mouth, opened it again, before she folded in upon herself once more, limbs a disorganized tangle as she tugged at the leather already stretched taut over her back. The heartbreak was there, settled back inside of her like some obnoxious weed that refused to be eradicated.

When she next spoke, her voice was weaker, slower; a thunderstorm that had spent most of its original fury:

“She said we weren’t right for each other. She said she’d be expected to marry a Chieftain in the future — or the son of one, anyway, never a daughter. So… she kinda of figured, instead of getting too deep, and being made to pine after one another years later, it would be sensible for us to stop now… this… fling.”

A gasp escaped her throat. It took Finn a second to recognize it for what it was — a sob. Valiantly she kept it under control, and braved on with her narration, trying her best to keep her voice even.

“I just thought, when we kissed, that it would mean more, to her, you know? Than a fling? And she said she would probably end up marrying… someone like Eirik. The heir to a powerful Tribe. You have no idea how jealous I was because of that one sentence, Finn. I just couldn’t help but think how if I were heir, then we would be Chieftains together, and maybe she wouldn’t… and it doesn’t help that I’m also envious of Eirik, because he’s so smart and always better than I am at everything he does, and I feel like he’s taking Zephyr away from me like he’s taken the other things in my life — my Dad, my title, my achievements… except he hasn’t, and have always been like a brother, yet I’ve said such horrible things about him and Uncle Gustav…”

By the end she had buried her head in the small shelter between her arms and knees, as sobs shook her thin frame.

Finn didn’t know what to do, so he put his hands on her knees, like he’d done earlier, and squeezed. A moment later, Sigfrid put her hands over his. Her palms were clammy and warm, and trembling with the weight of her guilt. They breathed together, unspeaking, sharing in this odd yet enveloping comfort.

Finn half-turned to watch the sun behind him. Their shadows covered half the peak.

“Thank you,” Sigfrid whispered. “I’m… I’m really glad you came here, Finn.”

He turned back and shrugged. “I… I didn’t really help. I mean, your problems, with Eirik, with my sister… I can’t really do anything for that — ”
“I know.” Abruptly she slid down the rock, and pulled him into a light hug. “You listened. That’s enough.”

“Ah,” he said, face muffled against her shoulder.

“Still going to annul our betrothal once you come of age, though.” She grabbed his collar and pulled him a little higher. Then she bent down, and Finn felt her lips peck his own.

His mind went blank. This wasn’t his first kiss — that had been the courtesy of Buffnut, when they were ten — but somehow it felt radically different, this time around. Belatedly, Finn’s cheeks flushed crimson.

“Just to see if I’m missing anything,” Sigfrid said, totally nonchalant as she pulled back. She smacked her lips together thoughtfully, then shook her head, chuckling. “Nope, still like girls better!”

Chapter End Notes

1. A little tribute to book!Hiccup here: Nuffink is both left-handed, and a master sword-fighter! I hope to showcase his sword fighting skills in the future. He’s also a good cook, but that’s unrelated to book!Hiccup.

2. So now you get why Sigfrid has been such a bully to poor Finn! I have a pretty clear idea of how the betrothal came to be, and if I ever write it as a one-shot, I’ll post it under my drabble Fic :)

3. Sigfrid (also Siegfried) is actually a neutral name: in Sweden and Germany it is more masculine, but in Norway it is considered more feminine. Same with Zephyr, though Zephyr does have more masculine origins (originally name of a wind god).

4. Now, a little backstory I couldn’t fit into the exposition of this chapter:

Gustav moved to Berserker soon after RTTE, having fallen for Heather after meeting her (he was around 16/17 at the time), and spent the next couple years integrating himself into the village. I like to think that, while he never lost his smug and childish side, the side-eyes and ridicule he’d had to endure as an outsider ended up making him a lot more mature and considerate. As he matured, he became more respectful in his attempts to woo Heather, and worked on bettering himself into someone worthy of being her husband. Slowly the village (and Heather) warmed up to him, and they began dating probably sometime during the events of HTTYD2 (he was 18, she was 20). About a year later, he gave Dagur his bride-price and proposed to Heather (this happened before the start of HTTYD3, when he was 19, and she was 21). The engagement was short-lived, though; a few months later, by HTTYD3, the Warlords came and… you know. Seven months after he died, his son Eirik was born.

5. I also want to talk a little about the three kids who have been the main focus of this arc. I thought I did okay in their characterization and backstories, but I would love to hear your thoughts!

Nuffink: Obviously the easiest because I’ve spent the most time with him. I feel he would be more expressive with his emotions; he’s cheerful and enthusiastic, and sometimes sarcastic, but overall he’s just a pure soft boy who wants everyone to get
along. He inherited his Dad’s optimistic outlook, tending to see the best in people, so it takes a lot for him to really dislike someone — which is why he still considers Sigfrid his friend, despite their awkward history and how mean she’s been to him since their betrothal.

**Sigfrid:** She was always hard to pin down for me, but I tried to make her somewhat sympathetic. She’s a sixteen year old girl in love — and has been for the past several years! Last year, when Zephyr finally returned her affections, she naturally began to imagine all sorts of wonderful futures with the two of them… only for a letter to tell her otherwise. Basically she went through a bad break-up, and is still dealing with the aftermath. While it might seem cold of Zephyr, keep in mind that she has her own problems to deal with, especially her insecurities after her coming-of-age and shield portrait. It also comes down to how much they value the relationship; Sigfrid treats it like a romance, Zephyr treats it like a fling or some mutual exploration with a friend.

**Eirik:** I know I promised to spend time with him, but Sig & Finn have taken way too much space already! He’s kind of the Jon Snow character of the series. The kid had a pretty rough childhood, which is why he armors himself with politeness and tries his hardest to excel at everything and prove people wrong. Dagur made him heir not only to commemorate Gustav’s sacrifice, but also as an attempt to make the boy’s life easier. He’s always viewed Eirik as his son, and by making him his heir, he attempted to cement that relationship, and send a stern message to whoever mistreats/bullies the boy. It worked to an extent — Eirik is definitely treated better — but in a way it worsened the situation, because people didn’t know how to act around him anymore. Even though he has learned to embrace solitude, he is still very lonely most of the time, and it’s no wonder how much he values his few friends (his cousins and the Haddock children).

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