Leið

Astrid and Hiccup's "romantic flight" comes to an abrupt end when the Red Death follows them out of the nest. Following an unexpected and desperate fight, Astrid finds herself stranded on an island, injured, with a crippled and comatose Hooligan heir and his overprotective Night Fury. She's going to get them home—all three of them—or die trying.

Notes

Hello! A few things before we start:

A note to the readers: It's been a long time since I posted a full-length fic. Though I've written dozens and dozens of deviation summaries, I've decided (more like been bamboozled) into writing another out. This was my NaNoWriMo project so it's at least 50K words and divided into four storytelling quadrants: Vakti, Vera, Koma, Gildi. That said, I might be a bit inconstant with updates and I apologize for that.

Please understand: This story follows Astrid Hofferson's POV. It takes place right after she and Hiccup discovers the nest. Earlier that day she hated Hiccup and I'm going to keep her character as constant with her movie, canon self as I can. Same with Hiccup. This is not a romance story. This story does, however, contain gory and uncomfortable situations in the future. Be warned.
DISCLAIMER: I do not own HTTYD or the characters

Enjoy!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Astrid awakens amidst the wreckage of a battle she can barely remember. As she pieces together the moments of the night she comes to the horrifying realization of how dire her--they're--situation really is.

It felt as though she had been plunged in the Ice Rivers of Hel. And, for a time, she nearly believed it. The roar of the sea helped gull her into the half-dream; a rhythmic roll of salt and sand and lapping water that stoked her senses. A ruffle cracked the wind—a harshly shaken cloth. Then the popping: like tiny twigs under boots… or the snapping of dry bones.

Her skin felt stiff—and not only from the cold that had managed to seep through her clothes, through the fine hair of her arms, only to settle on her bones and weigh down every limb like sap on a tree. She felt stiff and frail, as though she were made of glass, as though the smallest movement would wound her.

She would have closed her mind, pulled away from her senses, and slept, if not for the unsettling sense of urgency and the sheer discomfort, telling her that she had to get up immediately.

Something horrible had happened. The pain and exhaustion and the soul-deep ache that acute fear always seemed to leave was keeping her from shutting out the world, as she so terribly desired to do.

Astrid’s first breath felt acrid. She convulsed, and the coughing that followed sent her into a mind-blanking fit of agony that only ended when she forced herself to lie still. Sharp pebbles dug into her face. She felt twisted.

She swallowed and wondered if her throat had cracked from the inside; even the words felt dry as she tried to sound out a weak cry for help.

Heavy eyelids peeled apart and darkness greeted her—a burning black that watered her eyes and left her senses rattled.

Astrid lay still, keeping her breathing mute and calm as her vision adjusted. Swirling grey mixed in, lighter and lighter until she could make out the cloudy night skies and thick smoke.

She waited until she heard nothing outside of water and popping and rushing air. Then Astrid stretched her neck to peer around with wet, stung eyes. She was on a beach of some kind, with the horizon blotted out by the air of destruction. Shadows of every depth darkened the smoke like a spotted coat. Small fires provided the only source of light that cut through the night; they dotted the sand and brush, of every size, and none man-made.

Astrid didn’t know what was feeding the flames, but something putrid met her nose. Something more than the fumes of destruction. Something toxic. Like poisoned meat.

Her ears drew back as the crackle of her surroundings gained sense. Fire. It was fire she heard mixing in with the water at her feet.

*Fire... roaring, rushing, spinning, heat...*
She had fallen into fire.

She and—

“Hiccehheh—!”

The coughing returned. Astrid felt a blade bury itself into her side with every involuntary breath and knew her ribs were damaged.

Even as her body spasmed, she struggled to pull herself to her knees, arms shaking. Rocks embedded in her skin fell loose with the slow rise. Her knuckles were as scraped and bare as she imagined her face must be—the part that skidded across the pebbled beach as she was thrown from the dragon.

*The impact. Her head knocking against the saddle.*

She tightened her gut and throat against another cough. The air burned her freezing skin. Her arms were red, raw, and blistered.

*They fell. Fire. Unreal heat clawing at every exposed piece of flesh as she clung to leather and scale. Not Hiccup. Hiccup was—*

Astrid hissed as a twisted shoulder-guard dug into burned flesh. She reached across her chest, taking another stab of pain to her ribs for the movement, and ripped it off. The shoulder of her tunic tore.

Snapping silence bled through twisting tendrils of smoke, and with the dark silhouettes too far to make out, too close for comfort, her mind lulled into flashes of earlier.

*Screaming. Draconic screams. Outraged and unforgiving—a melody of terror that punctuated Hiccup’s silence.*

“Toothless?” The rasp cost Astrid another unnecessary spasm of pain through her torso. Her jaw clenched.

The hair on the back of her neck rose. She couldn’t remember… she couldn’t remember anything after falling. What happened to Hiccup… If the dragon died or survived… Escaped or remained…

Astrid dragged her feet under her and, with a soft grunt, she pushed herself up. Dizziness took hold immediately. Her body screamed for water and sleep. Mostly water. Her mind wanted comfort and company.

“Toothless?” Astrid whispered again, delicate to her injuries. She stumbled through the miasmic atmosphere with shallow breath and pain tearing across her lungs. “Hic—Hiccup?”

Her feet sounded entirely too loud but she hadn’t the strength to control her weight. The screams—roars—whatever—of that beast felt fresh and loud in her memory. Fear clung to her spine like a leech she couldn’t shake.

*’It could still be here, ’* her thoughts whispered, hauntingly. *The Queen,* she had called it. Hiccup had laughed; a humoring chuckle more than anything else, with his white-knuckled grip on the saddle betraying the adrenaline pumping through his veins from their fresh escape. He was mid-laugh when they noticed *the Queen* had followed them. Astrid remembered: her heart had barely calmed from the terror of discovering the nest before it picked up speed again upon glancing over her shoulder.
She’d never forget the way it came from the shadows. There were so many eyes; it was remarkable that Astrid could remember the hatred within them, in the dark, with their closing distance, amidst a body the size of her entire village—she could see its rage with exceptional clarity. It was the sort of memory that would spark up in the quiet moments, uninvited, for the rest of her life.

Astrid allowed herself a brief cough and a weak sniffle. She took the pain that came with both actions and hobbled on. Her knees ached. Her ankle seemed to vibrate with fragility and she knew it must have been twisted in the impact of being thrown.

One thing haunted her above all else: She hadn’t seen it die. The Queen.

Coldness closed around her throat and Astrid stumbled forward, squinting through stinging ash as she tussled through clipped memories, hoping to find some proof that they were safe from the beast. She couldn’t. She did not see its death. She did not see if it perished in the explosion or if it crawled away in the veil of smoke, and that made every crunch of rock beneath her foot, every hair-raising length of silence, so much worse.

She speared the rising smoking with caution, body shaking, heat leached from her skin. Her mouth tasted of blood. She might have loosened a tooth, but her tongue felt too dry, too laden, to check properly.

A bird called from somewhere far into the smoke.

Astrid bit down a shriek. How could anything have survived this wreckage? But she supposed there had to have been some life on this island beforehand.

The pounding in her temple sharpened. Had there been green she spotted just before they ascended into the clouds? She couldn’t be sure anymore. She felt her grip on reality slipping; she swore her mind was playing tricks on her. This could still be a dream—all of it: Hiccup and the Night Fury. The monster in the volcano. Maybe this was Hel. Or maybe she hadn’t followed Hiccup in a fit of rage and was back on Berk, in her bed, safe, and only enduring a nightmare.

The fear seeded in her belly spread and tightened with crushing certainty as she came upon a looming shadow; a black wall rippled behind thick air. Shifting smoke refused to reveal any details lest she step closer, but the smell of flesh heightened, malign and choking. The very, very weak hope that what she stood before was a small mountain, or a cluster of tall trees, failed to take.

She hadn’t seen it die.

Astrid took a step back. Something glinted through the smoke. A tooth?

It might be Her. Injured but waiting.

Maybe it would move. Lurch. Kill her.

She tried to backpedal faster without losing her footing or making too much noise. She could taste her own terror in the back of her throat like sick. She could feel the rattle of her breath and quake of her legs, and a deep, miserable ache in the core of her palm that demanded wood and metal.

Her axe was on Berk—where she should have been, rather than this nightmare.

Every shift of atmosphere caused the shadow to shimmer and waver. The quick pull in her muscles screamed at her to bolt. To turn and run.

She squared sideways, keeping half an eye on the motionless, dark mass, and walked in another
direction. Nothing came after her, not as she teetered across uneven land, hating the heavy, rasp of
her breath, unable to breathe through her nose, which seemed clogged by blood.

The dark wall dimmed as white smoke filtered between them until Astrid was once more left in a sea
of floating gray and burning wreckage. She moved onward, though she didn’t know the layout of
whatever island they crashed into. She remembered spinning and rising, barely grasping her
surroundings. She might have seen a bright line of sand… a dark mass of trees… spikes of rock…

They had gone south to Helheim’s Gate—she knew that much—then back north. They hadn’t made
it far before the Queen came plowing after them like a nightmare. Six enaged eyes and a mouth
open and ready to swallow them whole. Hiccup had dove and risen, swerved in and out between
jets of fire, and Astrid held onto him. She squeezed his thin chest and kept her head down, hating
that she couldn’t do much other than shout warnings. She had gotten so lost in that moment. She had
no idea—no idea—where they were.

Astrid’s feet slowed as another silhouette came into focus—one roughly the size of a wagon. A stark
shadow amidst pale smoke. She slowed only for a second, then something thumped in her chest and
Astrid limped faster, favoring her left leg as she hopped to the closed, bat-like wings.

“Toothless—!” She doubled over; the call cost her.

Astrid gripped her side, grit her teeth against a cough, and finished closing the distance at a stumbled
crouch until her knees hit earth and her ankle flared with pain. She reached out and touched the hard,
cocooned black wings.

“Toothless, please…”

She knew he wasn’t dead. She saw the lump rise and fall with labored breathing and she refused to
believe it a trick of guttering flame. Her touch sparked more movement and, with a low moan, the
dragon pulled his head from his wing. He blinked at her, pupils stretching across green irises in the
dark. Astrid didn’t allow herself to indulge in her relief long.

“Toothless, we ha—ah!—,” her side kicked in the excitement and she gripped, again, at the torn
tunic, “—ve to find… Hiccup.”

Toothless whined again at something Astrid couldn’t yet see. His top wing lifted, cracking open the
dark shell around his body. Wrapped in thick, scaled limbs lie a very still Hiccup. Astrid sat on her
heels and stared at the mop of brown hair burrowed into Toothless’ chest. The muted joy of finding
Toothless melted into something sharp and sour that clung to the back of her tongue.

She swallowed. “Is he—?”

Toothless loosened his hold as Astrid reached forward, pulling the motionless boy closer and laying
him out so she could properly look at him.

Pale, she saw, incredibly pale. His face was scraped but intact, mouth bloodied enough for Astrid to
feel torn between a bit tongue or internal damage. She ran her hands down his neck and chest,
further pulling him from Toothless’ grip with barely-conscious gentleness. She placed her ear to his
mouth but found the hammering of her heart in her ear, the prickling chill of her own skin, too
distracting to discern breath.

“I think he’s breathing,” she muttered, “but…” She shifted to his chest, pressing her ear against thin
ribs—also intact. Something beat back at her.

“He’s alive.” She whispered and lifted herself back with a winded wince. “He’s freezing,” she went
on, patting his head, shoulders, chest, sides, “but he seems to be—”

The rest of her diagnosis crystalized in her throat like hard, digging spikes. The gritty sand of the beach dug into her shin. Her ankle throbbed. Her face felt stiff and wrong. She couldn’t get enough air into her lungs without shifting a broken bone.

Yet, Astrid couldn’t take her eyes away from Hiccup’s foot. Or, what used to be his foot, now mangled beyond recognition. Everything below his left ankle appeared flattened, fluffs of his boot clinging to blood and bone. The pant leg was torn and the exposed skin blistered with the thick, thick red that seemed to touch everything. Not just red with blood but also with the flesh beneath, stripped of skin.

And black. Flecks of black.

White. Seeping, bubbling—

“Guh-gods—”

She couldn’t afford to vomit; her ribs would never allow it. Astrid clasped a hand to her mouth and closed her eyes and tried, with every fiber of her being, not to breathe in the sulfur, not to envision Hiccup’s leg and associate it with the smoky, acrid taste of the air. Her stomach heaved and she bore the pain of her spasming torso for what felt like an eternity.

The dragon cried out in a way Astrid had only ever heard a maimed dragon cry. He had twisted enough to see Hiccup’s foot, left wing still outstretched toward the sky.

“He’s… okay,” Astrid croaked. She reached out—thoughtless—and placed a hand on Toothless’ brow. “He’ll be… I’ll see what I can do.”

Toothless whimpered. He didn’t acknowledge Astrid’s touch; he rubbed his nose against Hiccup’s temple, added a small lick to the ruffled hair, and moaned again. The noise warbled and pitched at the end and something in Astrid’s chest grew taut.

She hovered over Hiccup, feeling her own panic heighten.

“Let me… just let me…”

Shit. She didn’t know enough about healing arts. She’d always been focused on offense, on dishing and taking, but never treating. She’d taken Gothi for granted. She’d taken her mother and brother for granted. Someone had always been around to patch her up. She wasn’t prepared for this. She wasn’t trained.

“I have to set it,” she mumbled. “I need to align the bone as… as best I can.” She’d mess it up. This wouldn’t end well. “And… and wrap it. We’ll need clean water. Cloth.” She felt dizzy in naming the list, as though thinking were too hard. “There’s water over there…” Salt water. She’d have to cleanse it.

She felt her pouch, still hard against her hip, with an absent, patting hand and reached in, hoping to find something useful. The first thing she felt was sharp and rough and her fingers emerged with a small whetting stone caught between them.

“I have this. Ah, flint rocks, too, but you got that covered, right Toothless?” She spoke only in a whisper. Any louder and her ribs would go from a dull ache to full blown agony.

Fire and a sharpening device were at her disposal. A start.
Nothing else rattled in the pouch and Astrid felt her heart sink. She stared at the meager collection of stone wondering what she could possibly do with them. Her eyes fell to her red-knuckled hands fisted in her leggings and the battered skin of her arms, no longer protected.

“And these—!” She pulled off the scrapped remains of her armbands. It was cloth, and cloth would be useful.

She placed them with the stones, between herself and Toothless, and looked.

“We have the saddle and metal scraps, I guess,” she mused aloud, “but I’m not much good with it…”

Hiccup was good with it. Too bad he was useless. If she hadn’t pressed her ear to his ribs Astrid might have thought him dead. His breaths were shallow, chest hardly moving.

She considered the straps crossing his tunic, frayed and blackened, but strong.

“Hiccup’s harness, I suppose…” More leather strips. They might come in handy too.

A scaled lip curled and rattled with a low growl. One of Toothless’ heavy-palmed forelegs outstretched over Hiccup’s chest protectively. Astrid grimaced back at him.

“What’s important is that we survive. Hiccup can make new ones once we save him.”

Toothless pulled his head back marginally. His lip dropped and his earfins perked. Astrid wondered if the word ‘save’ placated him. She noticed the chipped scales over Toothless’ leg, some seeping with a dark green liquid, and followed the limb to larger patches across his shoulder and neck.

“Are you hurt?”

She couldn’t believe she hadn’t thought to ask earlier. The dragon seemed otherwise whole and unharmed, save for the twisted metal wrapped around his tail, though he hadn’t bothered with any attempt to stand or extract himself from Hiccup.

Toothless looked at her—large, evocative eyes searching her face—before he turned back towards Hiccup and moaned miserably. Astrid might have found his solitary focus on Hiccup endearing if it weren’t so sad.

“You can’t fly, can you?” she asked. She saw the half-tail. “No.”

They wouldn’t be flying back home, lest another dragon arrived and Toothless convinced it to help. Even then, Toothless himself would be trapped and something—other than the obvious debt she found herself owing the dragon—told Astrid leaving him wasn’t an option. That she’d never be forgiven.

“You keep him warm and—,” she wouldn’t say alive. She needed the dragon calm and compliant “…safe. I’ll go find supplies… I’ll figure something out.”

She braced her palms on the ground, watching as Toothless stretched his wing over Hiccup and the boy disappeared from view once more.

Smoke and debris kept the air thick; flame-devoured wreckage popped in every direction, unseen. Astrid squinted back at the shadow she had seen earlier—the wall she knew in her gut to be the Queen dragon.

“Is she out there?” she asked. She could taste the ashen air more than ever. “Is she…?”
Dead.

Toothless cast her a glance with his nose still buried under his wing—probably cold against Hiccup’s neck—and made a soft barking noise. It sounded unconcerned. Not frantic. Either he didn’t care if she were murdered by a revenge-bent Hel-dragon or he was assuring her that the Queen wasn’t there.

“It’s safe?”

He repeated the noise.

Astrid pushed herself to her feet. Everything hurt—from the weight on her ankle, to the stab in her lungs, to the stiff, cracking, inflexible pull of her skin.

“Okay. Okay then… I’ll find supplies.” It helped to say things out loud, despite the pain of talking. It made her feel less alone.

There wasn’t much she could do for herself other than clean her own wounds, but her care would come later. She could walk and she could speak and both were a sight better than Hiccup.

“I’ll find forest.” She saw one; tiny and inland, a cluster of *something*. She *swore* she saw one…

“Keep him warm, Toothless. Can you do that for now?”

Toothless closed his eyes and tucked his head beneath his wing, joining Hiccup in a nest away from reality. At a distance, Astrid imagined they looked like nothing more than an unusually dark boulder.

She stifled the odd yearn and near envy to crawl under that wing, told herself she wasn’t purposefully excluded. She dearly wished for warmth and rest; a desire that took the strength from her legs and loosened something in her chest enough to choke her. She left them, needing to keep busy. Resting wasn’t an option. Indulging in an incomprehensible need for comfort wasn’t an option.

Astrid shuffled further from the rhythmic break of waves. The cold picked up as she left her only source of companionship.


Maybe she could make a bowl? Heat the water. She had nothing to heat water in… but there were rocks and a forest nearby. She’d think of something. She’d find something. She had to find *something*. The top of an acorn, even.

There was… *bone*.

Her feet stopped before she registered the *mountain* behind the fog. Through the rising smoke, the putrid, flecking remains of half a jaw came into visibility.

The hair on the back of her neck rose, even as the smoke continued to move, even as she saw there was no top jaw, no complete head. A concave face, lighted by jumping flames, smoldering remains that stretched nearly as high as the steps to the Mead Hall, ropey insides spilling and dark…

She was dead—the Queen. *She had to be dead.*

It didn’t stop Astrid from stumbling sideways and limping towards the smattering of trees—or what she thought were trees—on the far opposite of the beach.
Wood first, something inside her, something desperate for focus, screamed. Fire and splints.

Astrid hated the irrational fear that clung to her bones in jitters and worked against everything her senses told her. She hated anything that left her impeded in a time of need, and yet, she couldn’t look at the Queen. She couldn’t breathe in her remains. She was going to be sick when she couldn’t afford to be sick. She couldn’t afford to struggle with air or coughing—not in the current setting, with smoke that cleared far too slowly, and damaged bone pressed against her side.

Again, she worked through logistics, hoping to find a steady platform to work from. They were trapped on an island and she had no idea where other than south. North of Helheim’s Gate, south of Berk. Possibly somewhere to the east.

She had to get north.

How? She had no idea.

The charcoal remains of a blackened forest came none too soon. Though silly, a new setting did ease the painful hammer of her heart, still fluttery from the shock of the Queen.

Astrid stepped through with light footing. The hollow, cindered husks that crumbled beneath her weight grew harder as she pressed on until actual wood revealed itself, broken, jutted, blackened by fire, but usable.

“Okay,” she muttered, “Okay… sticks.” She bent her knees to pick up the first small branch shaken from the explosion—sooted, not crisped. Even further she could see a whole forest, but she needn’t walk that far. She hoped she wouldn’t have to walk that far; the weakness in her body only grew as she continued to deny herself rest.

Something cawed in the distance and Astrid had a dizzying moment of deja vu.

Toothless couldn’t fly.

Her eyes lost focus. She bent to pick up another stick. The bark slid roughly against her palm.

The only way home was by sea. To sail north on a… a what? A raft? A plank?

What was she thinking?

And Toothless… She couldn’t abandon the dragon to the island, but she couldn’t very well take him back to Berk either, could she? Unless she landed somewhere out of sight, miraculously, and worked from there. If she got to Berk.

The sea was so dangerous, so cruel. To brave it on a ramshackle raft with no knowledge of where she was going… that was foolish.

All the same, she had no choice.

The collection dug into the blisters lining her arm. Astrid bore the discomfort, unable to help but think of the blisters along Hiccup’s leg. The foot. What was left of his foot was something of a nightmare. She couldn’t fix it. She didn’t think it could be fixed.

It was going to kill him. Hiccup was going to die.

Her breathing quickened—stomach jumping in quick little pumps. Astrid felt hysteria and ocular pressure build. She threw her weight against the nearest tree; a couple twigs fell from her weak hold.
“Don’t cry,” she grit. Crying wouldn’t help her ribs. Crying wouldn’t help Hiccup. It wouldn’t get them home.

But home was so far. So incredibly far. They were probably going to die. Hiccup from infection. She from starvation or some injury she hadn’t yet detected…

Astrid took a deep, slow, stabbing breath and shuddered it out through puckered lips. No.

“I won’t die here,” she whispered, fierce. Her eyes burned and her cheeks felt wet, but the painful lump in her throat would not find relief through sobbing. She wouldn’t allow it.

Hiccup might die, yes. She couldn’t care for his leg, she didn’t know how. She would try, but she wouldn’t let the cold reality keep her from carrying on. She had to accept this before it destroyed her.

With newfound and near-spurious mettle, Astrid went about collecting sticks until her arms couldn’t take any more. She did her best to ignore the frustration and sorrow that she would likely die at sea. Not on this island—she’d keep fighting here—but once she put herself at the mercy of Ægir, she would do nothing but wait for death.

Stop. It.

They’d find land first. They’d have to. Even if they hit the Mazy Multitudes, it would be something. Something she could work with, hopefully. A place with supplies, or lush lands unsullied by exploding dragon queens. Maybe a place with civilization and healers…

Toothless could be very useful. She could survive with his help. She wouldn’t abandon him.

She needed him.

And if Hiccup died… well, she could carry on his work. Astrid owed him that much. She’d get Vikings to start approaching dragons in a new manner. They could start with the ones in the Kill Ring and work from there…

She would try, anyway.

The black, shifting mass came into visibility sooner than Astrid anticipated. The air felt clearer, her eyes stung a little less though her breathing hadn’t improved. Quite the opposite: the pinch in her side had grown into a constant squeeze that crunched with every shift of her body. The effort of keeping measured breath was starting to feel constricting, a steady push towards panic, and Astrid threw all her concentration to the task at hand.

“Oh, Toothless, I’m going to build a fire with—TOOTHLESS!”

Agony ripped through her side and for a moment Astrid saw stars. The corners of her vision darkened but she refused to take her focus from the dragon. Her feet staggering forward, sticks clattering together as they fell in a heap on the gritty sand.

The dragon was twisted around again—wing lifted—and was doing his best to lick Hiccup’s flattened foot.

Bile scorched her throat.

“Stop! St-stop!”

Astrid felt her stomach twist and this time she knew she wouldn’t keep from vomiting. The horror
from the moment she awoke hadn’t left her bones, and it returned in a full, rattling force. She saw her own two hands reaching out and shoving, enfeebled, against Toothless’s crown.

She nearly kneeled on Hiccup’s head as she fell to his side and thoughtlessly tried to keep the dragon from consuming any more of his blood.

Toothless snapped at her, teeth out with a vicious snarl equally as sharp, and Astrid was sent stumbling backward. Another cry left her lips, this time longer, louder. She gripped her side and curled into a ball.

“T-toothless don’t… don’t eat him…”

She sounded pathetic to her own ears, blinded and frail as she tried to pick herself up off the ground. She grasped for logic through the image of Toothless cocooned around Hiccup’s broken body, nose red with blood.

Hiccup was wrong. He was wrong.

Scratch drowning. Forget the elements or infection. They were going to be a dragon’s dinner.

She shifted to get her weight back under her. Toothless appeared to sneer at her—either her weakness or her words—and lowered his stained face to hover over Hiccup’s mess of a leg.

“Please,” she whispered.

Toothless responded with a curt growl, then he then licked Hiccup’s head in that sweet sort of gesture he’d done earlier with his eyes trained on Astrid and Astrid was suddenly struck with the impression that Toothless had no intention of eating Hiccup. He was caring for the boy in the only way he knew.

Her heart slowed. The pressure on her temples lessened.

“You—” She let out a painful breath. “Don’t do that,” she said, rubbing her tender side. “It’s not good.”

His earfins went back and he bore his teeth. He gave Hiccup’s scraped nose another lick with the utmost petulance. Astrid nearly felt energized by the following surge of annoyance that flooded her limbs. She calmed further.

She brushed a long lock of grimy hair from her eyes and winced at both the pain stretched across her face and the protest in her side. “I just…don’t want an infection to set in. You licking it might make things worse.”

In truth, Astrid didn’t know what dragon saliva would do to Hiccup’s leg but she couldn’t imagine it was good. Everything she’d ever known about dragons was toxic, a concern she felt confidence in given the smell of the slow-burning corpse lurking within the smoky veil she breathed.

Plus, it was gross.

Toothless snorted and Astrid pursed her lips. She wouldn’t apologize for over-reacting if that’s what the dragon expected. She didn’t apologize to dragons; especially ones indirectly responsible for the angry throb running through her body.

“Fire,” she whispered and stiffly collected the sticks she had dropped earlier. Setting a pyramid felt familiar and natural—possibly the most natural thing she’d felt in a long while. She grabbed larger
stones from the gravel she knelt in without thoughts and sprinkled them around the wood. She knew it was a pointless gesture but tricked herself into thinking it helped nonetheless.

“Can you hit that up?” Toothless looked from her pointed finger to the pile of sticks and rocks. “Ah, the flames?” She used her hand to make a flamboyant spitting motion. “Fire?”

What did he want? Surely, not an apology? Gods forbid she react badly to seeing a dragon mouthing a horrific wound, after the night she had.

Annoyed, Astrid parted her lips, pasty with thirst.

Toothless spit a small blue-white shot of fire. So quickly, scaled lips stiff, mouth barely moving, that Astrid jumped.

The sticks caught immediately—a wonder of dragon flame, she supposed—but Toothless coughed, smoke rising from the corners of his mouth, then looked panicked at the small body beneath his wing.

Astrid winced. Her skin seared at the new source of heat. “How’s… how’s he doing?”

Toothless moaned and settled his wing back down.

“Still breathing?”

He gave half a nod.

Astrid couldn’t help but marvel at his intelligence. She wondered how Hiccup came to know Toothless, what steps he took to create about such a bond. She could see why, of course: the dragon could communicate. He was helpful and conscious. He was… relatable to a human. More than a mindless beast as they had been raised to believe. But then, she mused, setting a few smaller stones around the fire and piling up the left overs, they had been raised in a war. Who could blame Vikings for thinking otherwise?

“I need more rocks,” she mused. “I’m going to try and… Well, I think I know what to do. Maybe.”

She didn’t have to say it out loud—if she hadn’t become so aware of her isolation, she might have felt foolish—but Astrid took a small comfort in speaking to the dragon. Not only for the fact that he might hold some basic understanding of what she said, but also in the reinforcement that she wasn’t alone. Not quite yet.

Toothless watched as she moved around, collecting stones and placing them down near the small fire she had going. Her burns prickled unpleasantly with the heat whenever she approached and snapped with cold whenever she left.

She crouched by the fire when she felt she had enough.

“I’m going to make something to hold water,” she explained. “I’m going to line it with… Her scales. I need you to help heat them. Can you do that?”

Breathing fired had hurt him, hadn’t it? She needed Toothless’s help; she was banking on it. He’d have to push through, as she had been doing.

Astrid used a flat stone to scoop in the sand until she’d formed a small basin, ignoring the discomfort of her ribs in favor of thought.
It could have been a shot limit, she mused. Toothless used… how many in that fight? Eight? Hiccup might have figured it out—the Night Fury’s shot limit.

Astrid could add that to the list of things she’d never learn because Hiccup was probably going to die.

She paused in her digging, hands moist, fingers inflexible and tinged blue. She held them out to the fire, ignoring the stitch running across the surface of her forearms, as though her burns were being split, in favor of soothing her fingers. She glanced at Toothless, then at the mop of saliva-dampened hair visible beneath the wing. Her gaze shifted toward the carcass in the distances—the closest part: jaw and neck. She’d need… she’d need a blade to remove the scales. She didn’t have one but…

Astrid crawled forward.

“Toothless, I need to see Hiccup. He has something I need.”

She hoped. He always had it. His laughable little blade. She made fun of him for it once, many years ago. He had upset her and she mocked the weapon he carried in his belt.

Now she depended on it.

Toothless lifted his wing and Astrid did everything in her power to avoid her gaze drifting down Hiccup’s body. She focused on his middle, parting his singed vest.

He doesn’t have his furs, she noted as she dug around his belt. Damn. He could have used the warmth. Hiccup was too pale. Had his breathing grown shallower in the time passed? She couldn’t tell. She was useless in the healing arts and it only added to her mounting vexation.

The blade wasn’t on his left side, but his right.

He’s a lefty, she recalled. Another thing she had stung him over in the past.

She stood with some effort, hand gripped around the short handle and its unfamiliarity, and decided they could call it even when she saved them both.

“Well…”

The smoggy air dispersed enough for Astrid to make out the dead dragon’s silhouette from their little camp.

She inhaled for courage—then cried out.

Toothless’s head shot up, ear-plates flat against his skull.

“I’m okay--!” Astrid wheezed. Shit, even squinting was starting to hurt. Maybe she had more damage than just her ribs. She noticed the burns on her arms bleeding. Probably from the sticks.

Hiccup first. Then her.

“I’ll get them. The,” she gasped, “scales. Just… stay with Hiccup.”

She moved off, limping across a familiar trail. The backs of her knees felt stiff, like they wanted to bend and crumple from her weight. She wanted to lie down and sleep, so badly that Astrid felt another ridiculous bolt of envy for Hiccup, warm in Toothless’s wings.

She approached the mountainous remains. The Queen. This time, fear didn’t send her shuffling
sideways. When the atmosphere thinned and cleared, Astrid stared upon the torn body with a tightened stomach and a clenched fist over the dagger. Bone loomed. Sinews trailed across dismembered parts like rope bridges. Dark, thick matter, what she assumed was blood, congealed around every piece. A portion of the neck hung from the lower half of the face like the gargantuan, rolled drapes of Jötunn.

Astrid stepped closer and gingerly touched the hide. Her fingers jumped at the sensation—neither cool nor warm. The scales might have been the size of her shoulder guard and there were thousands of them coating the throat alone, layered and patterned.

She followed the trail of body descending further into the mists. A chunk of arm. A couple of claws pitched into the earth. The tail and top half of the head were not within her line of sight but there was a mess, just barely visible, that still steamed and puttered beyond the sagging, collection of neck hide she touched; a flattened, torn stomach that now lay spread across half a mile of land in tangled hills of entrails and bone.

Astrid noticed the insides and wondered if it was edible. Berk didn’t eat dragon, but surely there were some cultures that did. She wondered if she could use anything else on the carcass to help them survive or escape.

Did dragon bone float? People made weapons out of them on occasion, but not boats.

She nixed the thought as soon as it came to her. Nothing on this beast would be in her power to move. It was too large.

No, if they were getting off the island, they would need a raft. A wood raft.

*But the corded intestines…*

Astrid stepped away from the jaw and squinted at the nameless organ coiled.

They were large, but could be cut into strips. The lining alone should be durable… If they were useful in other animals *surely* a dragon’s would be too.

Astrid glanced back at their camp, where she’d left her discarded arm wraps. Those would come in handy as well, if she didn’t need them for Hiccup.

Feeling slightly better just by having the skeletal, if jumbled, plan in mind, Astrid lifted Hiccup’s dagger, bearing the agony of her broken ribs, and started to hack at the coat of tightly knit scales.

Astrid continues her struggle to find a way off the island and comes to realize she has less time than she thought.

Reminder that this chapter gets a bit graphic in description. I also apologize for any terrible formatting. I'm really not the biggest fan of this site.

“Okay.”

When Astrid next approached Camp Black Boulder, it was with arms full of rough-hewed dragon scales and a wild pain gripping her very bones. Her ankle worsened and her limp grew more pronounced with exaggerated movements that only inflamed her side.

Toothless seemed to shake upon her arrival. He’d probably fallen asleep, somehow.

Astrid narrowed her eyes. “He alive?”

Toothless snorted, blinked, and lowered his head. His eyes followed scales scatter to the ground, dropped from her burdened arms.

The fire continued to dance, its heat limited, and its light dulled by the cloudy air. Astrid avoided it, its presence a reminder of the burns across her skin.

She got right to business and began collecting as many of the rocks around Toothless as she could find. There were rumors of beaches with sand so fine it felt like water beneath bare feet; fortunately, this was not one such beach. The sand was hard and thick and gravelly with stones and driftwood and usable debris. She nudged rocks with her feet or tossed them with her hands—whichever caused less pain, until a small, irregular pile grew around the hole she’d scraped out earlier by the fire.

She glanced over each rock she chose, searching for a possible sunstone. She nearly smiled at the thought. Yes, a miraculous tool to help her survive, out here in the wreckage of an unbelievable battle. Of course she’d find a navigation stone.

A twisted scrap of metal lying among the rocks caused Astrid to pause for a moment. She lifted an absent hand to her shoulder—suddenly flared with pain—and felt that it was bare, bloodied, and pierced. The fall must have violently detached her shoulder guard.

What was wrong with her?

A twisted scrap of metal among the rocks caused Astrid to pause for a moment. She lifted an absent hand to her shoulder—suddenly flared with pain—and felt that it was bare, bloodied, and pierced. The fall must have violently detached her shoulder guard.

Darkness, impact, pain—

Astrid left the scrap. There didn’t seem to be any good use for it, twisted as it was. Instead, she returned to the fire, fingers loosening the last of her gathered rocks, and peered at Toothless.
He’d saved her, hadn’t he?

She knelt in the sand, her breathing shallow, taking the pain with the movement.

Before she truly blacked out, things had gone dark. Hiccup had been dislodged, but not her. She had seen it…

*She gripped the saddle, reaching, Toothless twisted and…*

As though sensing her stare, the dragon picked his nose out of his wings, out of Hiccup’s hair, and blinked at her. Astrid looked down, face hot for reasons beyond that of the tormenting fire, and busied herself with lining her dugout with stone.

She tired quickly. Was it perspiration or blood bedewing her forehead? Perhaps even the clear seepage that she spotted on Hiccup’s leg earlier…Exactly what sort of condition her face was in was unknown, only that it hurt and that she didn’t want to touch it, because touching it would mean dealing with it and she couldn’t deal with it. Not yet. Not when it felt stiff and stretched like slow tearing fabric, the cracks either blistering, or sharp with cold. There was no way to tell, and no way she could handle another worry.

Removing the scales from the Queen had proven to be work her body wasn’t ready to undertake. Every lift of her arm cut off air. She grew dizzy and slow. Thirst made her tongue heavy and swollen. She’d have to rest soon. She’d have to stop caring about Hiccup or Toothless or her situation and lay down. She came close to crying twice and in any other circumstance she’d never reconcile falling victim to emotional release with so much on the line, but the hopelessness and the tragedy of her situation would rear up again and again, woven so tightly into reality that she couldn’t trick herself into ignoring its build.

And it was happening again.

Astrid gave a light shake and focused on her task, squinting through the blurriness of her vision. One step at a time was the only way to make any sort of progress. She was going to get off of that island, and that was a promise. It wasn’t over.

*It wasn’t over, yet.*

She pressed the collected stones into the hole she dug earlier, starting with the largest and filling in every crack she could with the smaller stones. Then she took the scales and began lining the rocks with the plate-like disks. Some were as wide and round as her face. Some larger. She grabbed a fist-sized stone and tried to hammer the lined scales into a tight, bowl shape.

“How’s it look?”

Toothless’s gaze flicked from the weird “ground basin” she’d tried to construct back to Astrid.

She would have sighed if her ribs would allow it.

“Can you try and heat these?” she asked, gesturing to the green-black plates. “I’ll be back.”

She picked up the most warped scale, nearly the length of her forearm and with a depression that could hold about a tankard worth of mead. She set off toward the ocean. The sound of Toothless spitting flame followed her into the mists.

The immediate loss of the fire soothed her burns and stole the little breath she had. Goosebumps flooded whatever healthy skin remained.
The walk was short—shorter than the one to the ruined forest in the opposite direction. The rolling waves called like a gentle whisper, even as she found the shoreline. Waves would not be an immediate issue. She could only guess at how much time had passed but it seemed that nothing about the sea’s volume had altered. No tide was good. No tide meant it was one of the calmer seas.

The Sullen, perhaps. The Sullen would be ideal…

She paused at the shore to see if any other landmasses could be detected.

Blackness.

Not even a horizon was visible. They were too far from sunrise and the sea too deep.

The smoke of the explosion had, however, cleared enough for her to see the sky. Still cloudy, but the constellations emerged like awakening eyes. Within seconds she saw Mimir’s Horn blinking right before her.

Breathless for another reason entirely, Astrid turned her gaze left. One by one the stars of Aurvandil’s Toe materialized. Then the Kvønnavagn, and then…

She strained. The Polestar flickered, in and out of passing clouds, faint but there.

If she turned, if the sky behind her cleared more, she’d hopefully see the Ratatosk.

For the first time that night—a veritable lifetime—the pain in her chest eased and something light and fluttery filled her broken ribs. Something an awful lot like hope.

Her heel pressed into the sand and she drew an arrow diagonal to her body position. That path. If they followed that path they should head towards Berk. Or something along the way.

Astrid returned to the “camp” with the precarious dish of scooped sea water and dumped it on the shallow basin of scale and rock. The hope that Toothless’ fire would have welded the overlapped scales together faded. She found enough satisfaction in the plume of steam rising with its terrible hiss and didn’t stick around to see how well the basin held.

It took four more trips, the water barely holding but the level rising, before Astrid deemed the collection usable and dropped the bowed scale.

“Open your wing Toothless,” she ordered. The collection of heated salt water rocked and steamed. It wouldn’t be there for long.

She took a moment to remove her skirt. Squirrel skulls scattered across the sand but Astrid doubted they’d ever be much use anyway—save for throwing at any potential predators that survived the crash. She was left in nothing but her leggings and tunic. It was a bit indecent, but thankfully warmer than when she first awoke. Astrid knelt back in the sand and began to cut away at the stitching that tied the leather pads to her skirt.

“I need your help—”

Toothless fired at the basin.

Astrid yelped. Water, hard earned water, splashed onto the sand.

“Not—no!” She spoke strong enough for a crunching stab in her side, but had gotten too used to ignoring it. “I need you to help with step two.” Getting off the island. “I’m going to do what I can for
Hiccup, but I need you to go that way,” she pointed toward the forest, “and get logs. Wood. Parts of
trees. Long branches.”

Anything flat would be too much to hope for, but she could work with anything floatable and
directable.

Toothless stared at her. She might have cried, but instead focused on locating the arm wraps she shed
earlier, all the while thinking: Please know what wood is.

She found the wraps at her heels and picked them up, giving them a light shake before dropping
them into the water.

“I need to build a raft.” She gestured to her right, to the sea, with her knife. “Something we can float
away on.” Her hand rippled through the air like a snake.

After another moment of confused staring, Astrid jabbed a finger at Toothless’ tail. “You can’t fly.
We,” she circled a finger around the three of them, “need to travel. We need to get Hiccup to other
people. He needs help.”

Toothless looked down at Hiccup, plates falling flat against his head, and back at Astrid.

“You have to get up and help.”

This Toothless seemed to comprehend. He lowered his head to the ground and dropped his wing
back over Hiccup. Astrid felt the pounding in her head aggravate. “I can watch Hiccup. We have the
fire to keep him warm. I’m sorry, Toothless, but I can’t do everything alone. I need your help. We both
do.”

Just when she was ready to concede that Toothless hadn’t understood her this whole time—it had
been a fluke, of course. He was just a dragon—Toothless shifted his legs beneath him and, with all
the effort of an elder, came to his feet. He seemed to stagger under his own weight for a moment and
Astrid felt an unintended pang of sympathy for the creature.

She had to wince at the rigging trawling metal at his back. Some of the straps on the saddle were cut
and loose and dragging underfoot. They would be more useful for the raft. She almost stood and
offered to remove them, but Toothless had taken a few too many steps and the ever-draining basin
weighed on her mind.

She’d take them later.

Astrid could have worried over what Toothless might bring back (Or if he would come back. How
easy would it be for him to abandon a pair of doomed humans?) but the daunting task ahead pushed
the Night Fury from her mind as soon as he was out of sight.

“Okay, Hiccup. Let’s get this over with.”

With the knife held ready against her palm and thumb, Astrid began picking out bits of shredded
boot and peeled back Hiccup’s pant leg as gently as she could. She cut away hindering fabric, a
putrid, overpowering smell slamming into her senses as she worked.

Her eyes watered. She winced at the foaming puss exposed in her removal of his clothing. How long
had this been festering? How long had she been out?

A few hours, probably. The sun had set when they made it to the Nest—an unexpected surprise. The
chase had felt like an eternity but likely only lasted minutes. She had passed out before the moon
reached its peak and had awoken into darkness. Hours.

Unless *days* had passed, which she seriously doubted because the fires would have been out and Hiccup would have been dead.

She lifted the sodden cloth of her arm wraps from the basin and squeezed them out over Hiccup’s foot. The hissing plunks, the sight of bone and broken skin laid bare as congealed blood loosened and ran into the sand, caused Astrid to recoil more than the burning against her palms. She swallowed back her unease as best she could and repeated the gentle washing.

Boiling salt water had to be good, right? Salt cleaned things and water-cleaned things…

She moved to pressing the heated, wet wraps against the wound, incredibly gently, dabbing at what remained—

Astrid abandoned her task.

Cloths fell from dead fingers as she turned to the side and heaved everything in her stomach. She spit bile, what she suspected were bits of her mother’s barley cakes, and flecks of blood. She curled into a ball, pressed her head into the sand, and continued dry heaving with the scent of her own sick flooding her nostrils and sustaining the spasms of her stomach.

She moaned, gasped, then cried. Convulsions shook her body. Her ribs must have been piercing her lungs for all the throbbing torment running through her bones and throat. Her spine wouldn’t straighten. Her face seared with tears. She couldn’t breathe save for a single, involuntary sob that came tearing through her gullet and nose, making her taste blood and acid.

She choked and cried and hated her body for breaking just then. When she hadn’t the time for it.

But Hiccup had parts of his foot missing.

*Parts of his foot.*

Gone.

She was missing a pair of toes herself, but it was a clean and old wound—a childhood accident quickly and properly cared for. Hiccup had three and a half toes gone if she could make any sort of judgment on the mess of twisted flesh she hadn’t been prepared for. A chunk of his foot as well, if she were to imagine it full rather than flat and buckled, with lumping skin and protruding bone and flayed muscle hanging from his ankle to heel.

She couldn’t fix this. There was no setting these bones because half were simply not there.

A very long moment passed where Astrid had to breathe in her own sick. Eventually her heart calmed and her body stilled and the waves of pain lessened. After another moment of sniffing into the sand she was able to push herself upward. She had to stare into the barely visible horizon with watery eyes and collect herself.

“Sorry,” she whispered to the comatose boy. Hiccup remained pale and peaceful, blissfully unaware of the hellish night. Rigid with agony, Astrid picked up the filthy rags, dunked them into the slow-draining basin, and attempted to move onto gentle rubbing.

She immediately stopped when she scrubbed some of the blackness away and fresh blood bubbled out. She needed the burn to keep him from bleeding out; she knew that much. But then, the burn was dangerous in itself.
Freya help her, she needed a læknir like no other.

She released the breath from her lungs and began prodding the lump of Hiccup’s foot into something somewhat resembling a foot with trembling, stained fingers. His foot would heal badly, if at all. She could accept that. It didn’t stop her hands from shaking or her stomach from rolling, the taste of vomit coating her tongue.

Sniffling, parched, Astrid washed her hands and grabbed her shed skirt. She shook the sand from it. It wasn’t the cleanest thing, but it had been protected from the elements of the night, sandwiched between her leggings and leather. It was all she had for a clean bandage.

She swathed Hiccup’s foot, unable to keep the desperate moan from her lips when she lifted the end of his leg and swore his foot tried to fall away. She swallowed down her jumping stomach and used one of the wet rags to tie the makeshift bandage.

At least it would keep his wound from exposure. At least. It was already splotched in blood from where she had been too rough in her cleaning and it seemed like the heinous morning had amounted to nothing after all.

Distant rustling cracked Astrid from her depressing reverie but a quick glance showed that it was Toothless—not a predator, not a miraculously surviving Queen—with a branch in tow about the length of his tail and as thick as his leg, lightly scorched but certainly solid for floating. He might have ripped off a tree, for all Astrid could see.

“Oh! Oh good!” her optimism sounded as forced as it felt. She knew her tears could be heard through her clogged throat. She sniffed and shifted back from Hiccup, wiping wet, soiled hands on her filthy leggings to little avail.

Toothless dropped the branch and scuttled up to Hiccup, nearly clipping Astrid in the head with his wing.

“He’ll be fine.”

Her voice sounded very far away. Faint. Probably with the lingering taste of her reaction, which, thinking on it now, Astrid was sure Toothless could smell. He could smell lies for all she knew. What did she know, anyway? About dragons, about healing arts, about Hiccup…

Other than that he’d probably be dead by tomorrow.

Stop. It.

She swallowed and focused on the buckled tail-rigging wound around Toothless’s spine.

“Do you want me to… get this off you?” she forced herself to say. She stood, and despite the pain in her legs and chest, decided she liked standing for that moment. She needed it. She needed to get away from Hiccup and the seeping blood.

Toothless arched from her outstretched fingertips and slunk away like a cornered cat. His lips curled and shuddered. He bore his ivory fangs.

Astrid sighed, calculated and shallow, too tired to feel the alarm of earlier.

“ Toothless… I think it’s hurting you. Please, it can’t help us now. I won’t destroy it. I just… it might be more useful off.” It got Toothless to stop circling away from her. Astrid stepped closer.
“There might be parts that I can use to help Hiccup. Like… the leather bits. Or something he can lie on…”

She took another step. She could see the green of his irises reflect through the dim miasma.

“For Hiccup, then?”

The dragon stayed put, watching her with wary, heavy-lidded eyes. His pupils weren’t constricted, which Astrid took as a good sign. He sniffed her fingers when they reached his nose. The heat felt like a soft mitten.

Toothless’s tongue came out and darted across her forearm. The blisters reaching from wrist to elbow came to life. Astrid flew backward with a hiss.

“Don’t! It—it’s fine. Don’t do that.”

Toothless moaned and lowered his head. The span of his neck and the ties of the saddle were exposed. Astrid approached again, keeping her arms away from the Night Fury’s face, and set to taking the saddle off. Parts were twisted and took some tugging that aggravated her injuries. Others fell away in pieces as soon as she untied them. The saddle itself remained whole—only the buckles and straps were truly damaged. The rigging was a mess and she doubted she could make any use of the metal, but the rope was another matter entirely…

The arm that got licked felt heavy, but oddly free of pain for a spell. Astrid tried not to wonder at the properties of dragon saliva just yet; this wasn’t the time for hypothesizing or experimenting, it was the time to stick to her blades and do what she knew would work: keeping wounds clean and bandaged and a shit ton of praying to the gods.

“Alright,” she breathed, dragging the last of the twisted metal from his tail. “Feel any better?”

Toothless shook his hide from his neck all the way down to his tail; fins and wings flapped like shaggy hair. Astrid smiled, but all it did was remind her how tired she felt.

“But can you get more branches? Maybe two more like this one and then smaller ones? Uh, thinner—” She motioned with her hands the width of the log and brought them closer together. “So, two like this—” she held up two fingers on one hand and pointed to the log Toothless had dragged with her other.

She nearly slapped herself a second later.

Dragons couldn’t count!

“Oh, I mean—”

Gods, what was she doing? This was mad, pointless—

And Toothless was off. He moved faster without the saddle warped around his body.

Astrid watched bemused and wishful.

She waited until Toothless was out of sight before carefully stepping away.

“I’ll be right back.” She told Hiccup, well past feeling stupid about talking to an unconscious boy and a dragon.
Toothless returned with another large branch only to find Astrid with a rather large pile of gurry and a clear trail of blood leading from the carcass of the Queen. The branch dropped and he leapt to Hiccup.

“Oh, he was fine,” Astrid snapped. “I could see him the whole time—see?”

She brandished a bloodied hand and dagger at the partial Queen, where the shadow of her lower jaw sharpened into focus. Astrid could see everything better. The carcass. The destruction. The blackened forest and the hint of trees in the distant left. The spilling sea to her right with its dormant tide.

Astrid particularly liked the thin strip of white that broke the skyline just as it touched the water.

Toothless snorted and growled. He thumped his tail against the sand and snapped at her.

Astrid jut out her chin and hacked at the entrails in her lap with added fury.

“We don’t have time to be too cautious. Hiccup needs a real healer or he won’t make it.”

A shrill cry followed her statement. A glance to the side showed Toothless throwing his head around and stamping harder. The dragon was throwing a tantrum and Astrid didn’t know if he were berating her for her lack of medical abilities or if he loathed the mention of Hiccup dying. Either way, she didn’t need an unfocused and agitated dragon on her hands, no matter how much she wanted to shake the damn creature and get him to obey her without freaking out every step of the way.

“Okay, okay! He’ll make it, calm down!” Her teeth clenched with the effort of raising her voice and her jaw ached with the force it. Her temper shortened with every distinct pound against her temples. She needed water. Her blood moved too slow.

“Keep getting sticks,” she ordered. “I’ll work on making ties.” Wet, ropey, strips of organs rolled across her lap. Hopefully they’d be enough to hold a raft together.

Toothless’ tail cuffed her shoulder as he turned back to the forest. It might have been an accident, but Astrid doubted it.

Biting down the urge to throw the knife at the dragon’s flank, Astrid harnessed her anger and wielded it towards cutting more thick ropes of intestines. They were slippery with a noxious odor that might have affected Astrid’s weakened constitution if she didn't have so much experience hunting. It proved dangerous work for how often the knife slipped, and only its admirable sharpness kept Astrid from stabbing herself several times.

Perk of working in a forge, she supposed.

Making line out of innards seemed a less demanding task in her mind. The work was slow, desperate, and left her wondering what the jelled, green blood might do her open wounds, but it kept her busy as Toothless returned with branches. It kept her focused, from thinking about Hiccup. Mindless work never bothered her.

Frequent hand washing was required in the task, and Astrid had to return to the shoreline to refill her shoddy sink a couple times—never when Toothless was around to see Hiccup unattended, of course. The insides were resilient if her efforts in cutting them were any indication and she felt confident that she could at least make it to the next island.
After all, the archipelagoes had no huge bodies of water; she would have to run into something…

The sun had nearly risen above the horizon by the time Astrid had enough timber to start laying out a foundation—a pearly globe shrouded in early haze. A chill crept up her shoulders as the morning mists rolled in to replace the fog. The air grew wet and her source of heat sputtered.

She hated asking Toothless to light another fire, still uneasy with their communication, but the last thing she needed was for Hiccup to freeze to death after all her work.

Toothless did so after returning with his twelfth branch. This one had a pale, supple bend to its thickest end, which led Astrid to believe he’d torn it from a live tree. Good. They’d need the strength.

He had, incredibly, managed to follow her instructions. Somewhat.

Astrid wasn’t in the mood to hand out any congratulations. She kept her focus on her task as the sun continued to rise and worked tirelessly through the final lapful of entrails.

“‘Kay,” she breathed when she finished, no longer smelling death, no longer feeling the splintering burn when she dipped her hands into the dark-watered basin. “Time to—” Toothless sniffed over Hiccup’s body in a steady series of quick grunts. “Yeah, you don’t care.”

Even speaking aloud had lost its luster as her throat grew heavy with thirst. The urge to cough kept arising. The knowledge of the pain it would bring kept it down.

An island with springs, Astrid prayed as she began the slow, breath-paced task of arranging four thinner logs. That's all I ask, Freya.

She placed the logs parallel in the sand with about half an arm’s space between them. Three thickest logs were lain perpendicular across. For those, Astrid needled Toothless to help her, even snapping at him when he moved too slowly. She hated asking for help as is, she didn’t need him making a difficult situation even more difficult. Couldn’t he sense the urgency?

The final, thin logs were placed on top of those. Each aligning with a base branch. All the while Astrid ached for the body she’d had a day before—when lifting logs twice her length would have been a readily accepted challenge. She wanted to breathe easy and curl in her furs and feel confident in being tested.

Criss-crossing the entrail strips around each point of wood contact proved more taxing than moving branches. She had to reach down. Then up. Her body twisted and bent and stretched and no matter how slow she went, no matter how quickly she tried to move her fingers, Astrid felt the piercing agony of her broken ribs.

She had no choice. She’d made it this far. She had to…

Her eyes felt as dry as her mouth by the time she stepped back. Her hands were slick and pruney and torn. She had a raft. She had a way to get off this Odin-forsaken island.

Astrid glanced at some of the smaller sticks left over and barely thought about what she did next. Using the leather straps cut from the saddle she tied the sticks to either side of Hiccup’s leg, securing the cloth-wrapped remains of his foot as best she could. That would keep it somewhat stable.

She wiped a hand across her forehead and grimaced when it came back smeared with blood. Not green, like a dragon’s. Her own.

Her face was a mess; she knew that even without a looking glass. Hiccup’s was pale. Perhaps paler in the thin sunlight than it had been in the night…

She forced her gaze away.

“One more thing,” she said to Toothless, who had returned to Hiccup’s side, dutifully, back to nosing the boy’s head, “and I’ll need your help again.”

She needed a paddle, and had spent a good portion of her working hours thinking over what she could use. She couldn’t weld one or carve one. A stick would be useless and she hadn’t the resources to build a sail.

“Come on,” she beckoned, moving toward the entirely visible mess of mega dragon.

She heard rather than saw Toothless land his haunches into the sand. She turned to see his tail thump the ground. He snorted.

He wasn’t leaving Hiccup.

Astrid might have anticipated this.

“We can see him from where I—” Breathe, she reminded herself, willing away the claws against her lungs. You’re almost there. “I need you to bite through a bone. It won’t take long. Please—I need this. I,” breathe, “gotta get Hiccup to a safe place. I need a,” breathe, “paddle.”

Toothless’ eyes widened but his ears fell back. He craned his neck around to Hiccup.

Astrid forcibly unclenched her teeth.

“Look I’ll… I’ll go over to where I need you,” She started walking. “And then you come over. You can still see Hiccup, okay?”

Please, Toothless, she mentally sent as she approached the dead Queen.

The fear of earlier had all but subsided. It would never be gone—some provocation at the back of her mind, something humiliating, told her she would never fully be rid of the terror linked to this night. But she could stand before dismembered dragon, mountainous in size, and not lose control of herself. The worries of the night overpowered her irrationality of earlier. The act of cutting scales from its carcass, further mangling the manifestation of terror, gave her added stability. A distant sense of closure, even.

She stopped before a shredded scrap of the dragon queen’s wing. Though only a portion of one wing, eaten by time and Toothless’ fire and the explosion of it’s own demise, it could floor the length of a stable.

Astrid walked across it and prodded one of the finer bones, ignoring the swollen, fat feeling of her ankle. That would do.
She turned and lifted her right arm. She could see Toothless. She could see Hiccup. She could see the sea and the rising sun.

Toothless could see her. They made eye contact.

For a moment, nothing happened.

*Come on, Toothless…*

She glanced back down at the wing. Perhaps she could hack through the bone herself. It wasn’t big per se. But it was thick. Even for a brittle wing bone. The effort of using Hiccup’s tiny dagger against it might drive a rib through her lung and kill her. She’d have suffered through that raft for nothing…

When Astrid next looked up she saw the dark mass slinking towards her.

*Thank Thor.*

The tack of hope dissipated a second later. Toothless stopped. He looked back. He moved forward again. He stopped…

Astrid bit down the urge to shout at him. *It wasn't a great distance.*

“Toothless, it’ll be quick.” She didn’t raise her voice. He could hear her just fine. “Please. The faster you do this, the faster you can go back.”

His trotting picked up speed. Well, he stopped looking back, at least.

“Right here,” Astrid said once he arrived. She pointed with her foot exactly where she needed him. “I just need you to bite the bone in half. Right here. I can do the rest.”

Toothless didn’t acknowledge her tapping toe. He slid past her, wings rising, shoulders hunched. His claws no longer made noise in the sand. He began to hiss.

“Tooth—”

The hiss turned into a drawn, high-pitched wail that sent a long conditioned shock of alarm up her spine. Astrid silenced and took a step back. It went on and on, piercing her ears, raising the hair of her arms. The scales running down the length of Toothless’ spine appeared to rattle.

Toothless fired a plasma blast at the Queen’s largest remaining bone, that mountainous, lower jaw. There was a flash of blue before the explosive impact. Blood and bone showered the smoking field of carnage. Remaining chunks of gum and hide rolled away like a rockslide, shedding more skeletal teeth.

Astrid stood to the side, unable to feel annoyed about the loss of more time. She understood.

Toothless let out a belly-deep, primal roar that shook the very air and instantly reminded Astrid that he was now the most dangerous creature on that land. She felt his rage. His self-loathing. His desperation.

She understood, perfectly, the need for retribution.

*Her own need for it landed her here.*

A chill swept her bare shoulders. She breathed through it.
“Come on,” she muttered, taking another step back. “Real quick.”

Toothless seemed to spit at the Queen before turning away, like a violent snort. A gesture Astrid, as a human, couldn’t quite place.

He sniffed around the bone Astrid indicated and, without looking for any more instruction, fired again. Then again, sizzling away the damaged hide. Then, faster than could have been anticipated, his teeth were out, neck striking, jaws snapping down in a crunch Astrid could feel.

Real quick indeed.

Her heart thudded. Toothless stepped back to reveal the roughly severed bone, shards falling from his tongue, and Astrid wondered if he could sense her fear. Her marvel.

She grunted out a quick “Thanks” and, without allowing for any more distraction, knelt down and grabbed the bone jutting out. She stabbed through the thinner wing material with the knife and yanked down. The expected pain from the rough action came accompanied by an unexpected noise. Toothless yelped.

Astrid turned, alarmed, and realized with some bemusement that this must be terribly grotesque for a dragon to witness. Her eyes fell to the uneven tailfin and a shot of sympathy sprang through her chest.

“Astrid,” she muttered. “You might want to… well, you can go back to Hiccup. I got this.”

Toothless didn’t need to be told twice. He returned to Hiccup, not sparing her another glance. Or, perhaps, not sparing the Queen one.

Maybe it was determination. Maybe it was her body finally falling numb. But cutting through the ruined wing went quickly. Quicker than the entrail ropes. Quicker than making a basin.

Astrid followed Toothless’ tail drag back to camp. In her hand was her paddle: bone from a dragon wing, roughly cut and frayed, but wide and strong enough to catch water. Paddling would be painful—she probably would pierce a lung—but she had little choice.

She brandished the paddle at Toothless, who, unsurprisingly, went back to curling around Hiccup.

“And that’s step one.”

Saying it out loud seemed to drive in reality. Step one. Step one out of how many?

It struck her again. The urge to cry. To sleep. To curse the gods. But she couldn’t.

She sniffed, set her jaw, and responded to Toothless’ inquisitive study.

“Now, we get off this island.” Step two. “With this,” she added for no reason, pointing at the raft. “Because you can’t fly,” she pointed to Toothless. “And he’s…”

Useless.

Hiccup remained unmoving save for the barely perceptible rise and fall of his chest.

Astrid’s hand dropped. She felt a bit loopy—delirious from the long night and losing her comprehension over the situation. She was thirsty. Incredibly thirsty. She felt as if she would never wake up should she give into sleep.
She looked back at the cake of stolen branches she meant to sail.

“This is the worst raft in existence.”

If she were being honest with herself, it wasn’t bad considering the circumstances. Uneven logs, riddled with dragon teeth and crisped bark, tied together with the stringy insides of a dragon Queen, that might or might not attract ocean predators. It’d keep them afloat and, with a slight vibe of optimism, partially dry.

It looked worse as the sky lightened.

Astrid bit her lip and turned to Toothless.

“This will hold me and him… I don’t think it will hold you.”

Toothless stood with a depreciating snort. Astrid thought, for a moment, that he might intend to get more branches (she couldn’t—she didn’t have it in her to repeat another raft build). Instead he pranced around to the shoreline and pawed the water-soaked sand.

Astrid squinted. “You…”

His tail swished from side to side.

“You can swim?”

The dragon threw his head about, ear plates flapping back and forth. Astrid could see his brow flatten and his nose wrinkle. His response was clear. Of course, human. Don’t insult me.

“I had to check,” she grumbled.

The world felt like it was tilting. She was so tired. It kept coming back to that—how tired she was. She needed to rest. To sleep. To eat. To cry.

She really, really needed to cry.

Instead she bent down, scooped Hiccup under his arms, and attempted to drag him towards the raft.

Mistake.

Fortunately, Hiccup’s head never left the ground and was caused no further injury when Astrid dropped his shoulders and fell away. Dark spots blistered across her vision and the pounding in her head exaggerated—she tried to focus on that over the sudden ripping sensation in her side. She could sense Toothless pacing around her as she struggled for breath. A high whine left her throat the first time she tried to speak and Toothless crossed all personal boundaries to offer his head.

Stupid

Astrid closed her eyes and pressed a hand into his neck, not knowing when she took his support. She focused on the sensation of his scales—warm, smooth, deceivingly soft…

Stupid, stupid

“I-I can’t lift him, my ribs—Toothless—” She blinked, vision clearing, and spotted the saddle in the sand. “Wait.” Breathe. “Got it.” She stepped away from the dragon. “I got it.”

Astrid still had to lift Hiccup in the end, as gently as she could, but using a base to slide him on made
the task ten times easier. When she had most of his weight rested over the flat saddle she made sure to check his breath again. She pressed her fingers to his neck and found his pulse quicker than before. She didn’t know if it was a good or bad thing, but to be safe, she considered everything bad.

Toothless took the straps of the saddle in his mouth and pulled Hiccup across the sand and onto the raft. Astrid followed close behind, bent uncomfortably and holding Hiccup’s injured leg up as best she could. She’d be damned if all her work was ruined by gravel.

It was a harsh and awkward move, but when she had Hiccup fully settled on the raft and part one was complete, Astrid allowed herself a moment of distraction. She hoped for a huge sigh of relief to bubble forth, to feel some sort of accomplished. A swell of pride, even.

Instead, a bird cried in the distance and Astrid only felt a sudden, horrifying jolt—like all the experiences of the night had bottled together and exploded in her chest. Her arms came to wrap around her stomach and she held herself, suffering the spell in tense silence, acutely aware of Toothless watching her.

_Stupid. Stop it._

It passed, and Astrid looked over her shoulder. The remains of the Queen were in full view—insides spilling from half of a swollen skeleton—and she felt it was something she’d never adapt to. In the distance, like grotesque landmarks: her clubbed tail. An outstretched, half-curled, stripped wing.

Her vision swung left. She saw the blackened forest and the specks of green now barely visible over the hill.

A hill. She hadn’t noticed a hill before. Perhaps some of the life on the island had survived.

Gods, how much had she walked? Back and forth, picking through the wreckage, lost in a fog. The island seemed smaller in the daylight, but also larger.

She turned back to the sea. It had to be the Sullen Sea. It had to be. She was counting on it. She was counting on her estimations and her memory of last night’s constellations, and the arrow she drew in the sand, now half gone.

Half...?

Wait. Did the Sullen Sea have a tide? There wasn’t a tide—she had established that.

Hadin’t she?

She shook her head. All it did was make the world spin and bring a faint buzzing to her ears. No time. She had no time for _what ifs_. She needed water. And help.

_Keep pushing forward._ If it wasn’t the Sullen Sea then it had to be some other sea. She’d still travel northeast.

“Ready?” she asked. Toothless yipped. It sounded almost optimistic for a dragon and Astrid took whatever strength she could from it.

She rested the wing-paddle over Hiccup like a sheer blanket and steadied her hands on the angular edge of her raft. Toothless braced the crown of his head at the other end. Together, they pushed off the shore of the small, ruined island, leaving the former Queen to smolder in peace.
Jenna-sais-pas is the talented editor who fixed up the hot mess I sent. Unfortunately, as I sad at the beginning, the formatting gets whacked when I try to move things over to this site so I apologize if it's harder to read.

The internal, boring stuff is coming to an end (hopefully) and we'll finally get to interact with some other humans in the coming chapters. Thank you so much for reading!
Chapter Summary

It's the morning of the Final Exam and Hiccup's absence is noticed. Meanwhile, Astrid finds herself in a new situation with a new set of problems.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Gobber!”

The chief sounded light and loud—jovial, even—so Gobber kept his beat against the molten steel.

*Strike, strike. Beat.*

He took the flecks of ember against the underside of his arm.

*Strike, strike. Beat.*

Felt the familiar jolt shock his bones.

“Stoick,” Gobber greeted with a raised brow. “You’re in good spirits for someone who just lost two ships.” *Strike. Strike.* “Correct me if my math is off, but that’s twice as many as your son lost us right before you left.”

Stoick stepped around a pair of hanging maces and fully into the shade of the smithy. Gobber glanced up, taking note of the chief’s puffed, barrel chest and crinkled eyes.

Stoick waved the comment by. “Ah, don’t worry about it. Today’s a day to celebrate! Got a little speech ready ‘n everything,” he said, tapping the side of his helmet.

Gobber’d bet his good leg that Stoick had had that speech ready for the past ten years, always hoping his son would miraculously earn it.

He snorted, the shorter bristles of his mustache ruffled.

“*Don’t worry about it,*” he says.” Gobber muttered. “‘Fraid I might have to miss the big event given all this work I have to do.” He broke rhythm to wave his prosthesis at the finely hammered sheets of metal leaning against the cool side of the hearth.

Stoick didn’t spare them a glance. “Och. I said never mind that.”

“Beams and Gunwhales,” Gobber went on. “Ribs. Y’know. All those things we need for building a ship. Or two. As we need two. Three, counting what your son did.”

“Gobber…”

“I swear, you Haddocks—”

“*Gobber,*” Stoick stepped around the anvil and hovered a hand over the steaming, twisted work so
that Gobber wouldn’t strike again. “I’ve waited for this day for years. You’re coming.”

Gobber grunted. He couldn’t fault the man: the day of the final exam and Hiccup—the Hooligan heir—not only made it through the course, alive, whole and surpassing everyone’s expectations, but was top of the class.

“Eh. Suppose I might make an appearance...” He scratched his chin for show. “Could take the opportunity to hook your son into doing some actual forge work. I let it slide given what we’ve seen in the Ring…but he’s never been this negligent. Am I going to have to look for a new apprentice after this?”

Stoick opened his mouth, but the voice they heard came from the left. Younger and higher.

“Did Hiccup run through here?”

Fishlegs leaned against the service ledge, puffing. A thin sheet of sweat dabbled his brow.

“Haven’t seen him,” Gobber answered before Stoick could get a word in edgewise. “Remarkable, really, given how much work there is to be done around here…”

Stoick rolled his eyes.

“What’s this now?” he asked.

Snotlout crossed his arms. “Astrid’s mom says she’s been missing since last night. Astrid, I mean. She’s gone. No one’s seen Hiccup either.”

The warmth seemed to have evaporated from the air. Gobber lifted the cooled sheet of metal with forceps and stuck it back in the hearth.

"Have you seen Hiccup today?” Fishlegs asked.

"Well, not yet."
“Did Hiccup come home last night?”

Stoick’s gaze lifted to the ceiling, fixed on the musty, cobbed ropes wound around rafters. “Er… I dunno.”

Ruffnut nodded like she had been expecting the answer.

“She killed him.”

“Or they’ve run off together,” Fishlegs piped up. Stoick stared. As did everyone else. Fishleg ducked his head. “I’m just saying, there’s been a lot of tension between those two. It could have built up until… well, you know.”

“Until they decided to run off and live happily ever after?” Snotlout intoned.

The twins shared a look.

“Nah,” said Ruffnut. “She killed him.” She held a hand out to her brother. “Let’s have it.”

Tuffnut sniffed. “Not until I see a body.”

“She—” Stoick cut himself short and continued, with some forced calm, “No one has been killed. He’s—they’re—probably out training. You don’t get to the final rounds of dragon training like they did without hard work.” Stoick paused, perhaps considering the hilarity of Hiccup and hard work. “The final exam is happening on schedule, so get out there and find them!”

The teens scattered.

“So, Hiccup didn’t come home last night?” Gobber said conversationally.

Stoick sighed something under his breath like, “It’s always something with him,” and then, louder, “I don’t know. Maybe. I had enough on my plate. I barely had time to talk to him let alone tuck him in—”

“Aye, no judgments. He’s a big boy. Well… you know. He can take care of himself. …Well—”

“Just stop.”

“She didn’t kill him, y’know.”

“Obviously.”

Gobber saw Stoick’s accompanying grimace and understood exactly. Astrid Hofferson was a competitive and prideful Viking and Stoick had been so stoked about his own son’s success that he hadn’t considered how she’d handle failure.

“How bad has the Hofferson lass been towards my boy this week?”

Gobber began hammering with enthusiasm.

###

#
Astrid’s ears ached. It wasn’t like the arthritic feel of her bones or the stiffness of her face and arms. This ache came from within. She felt it reach into the base of her skull; a ceaseless, pounding pressure that echoed into her gums.

Her throat had gone parched, lips crusted by salt and thirst. She wouldn’t drink the sea’s water, she knew better. She should have searched the island for a source of water. She should have taken the time, even with all her injuries, even with Hiccup’s fluttery pulse and mangled leg—she should have used the light of dawn to seek water. It was the most singular thought running through her dry, throbbing head.

There must have been something right? Something to drink.

*She missed something. Damn it. Of course she missed something…*

She dragged the dragon-fin paddle along the current. She ignored the protest of her muscles and the creak of her joints—elbows and shoulders that moaned with every push into the water.

Astrid checked Hiccup hourly. Or, what she felt was hourly. The sun drifted overhead with an agonizing stride. She had no shelter from its battery, and the burns she’d acquired in her fall had burst into activity. She felt them down her arms and across her cheeks and certainly along her brow. She suspected she’d lost some hair. She had the time to think about it now—her hair. There was a patch along her skull, the left side, above her eye, that felt blistered and raw and exposed.

Hiccup had yet to so much as cough. Astrid did her best to lean over his face and arms in a mild attempt to protect him from the sun, but his stillness, his pale, cold complexion…

He was going to die.

*She* was going to die.

Astrid felt honest admiration towards Hiccup for managing to survive thus far. Had he gotten proper care immediately, in any other situation, he might have been fine. But it was his Loki-spurned luck that he got stuck with her, just as it was her luck that she got stuck on an abscessed island from an explosion they caused, and would have to bear the burden for the Heir of Berk’s death.

“O-kay…?” she asked to her only lucid companion. The word cracked in her throat, but she had to ask. Just as she had to keep checking Hiccup, despite knowing he’d never improve.

The recipient flicked an ear in response, which Astrid took to mean: *yes, I’m fine.*

Toothless had saved them. Astrid would have never had the strength to keep paddling. Not for an entire day, going by the dipping sun. Toothless drove the raft forward with the detached collar of his saddle clamped in his mouth and hooked onto a snagged branch of the raft.

He *had* to be tired. The leather sleeve had to have abraded his jaw. His wings must have ached and the freeze of the sea must have slowed him down, but he pulled their little raft faster than Astrid could paddle.

In fact, it was his drive that kept Astrid pushing along, even though her arms felt leaden to the point where she could hardly believe they moved, and her side splintered, and her throat and mouth felt like bark. Even though she could feel her skin crisping, flaking, and her burns stinging with sweat.
She tossed water on her face not too long ago and nearly screamed. She did it again to a mantra of *salt-salt-salt.*

Salt was good. Sometimes.

Salt might clean. *Might.*

Astrid swallowed for the hundredth time. The thousandth. She *hated* swallowing. It hurt. It reminded her of her thirst and how her body slowed. She wakened more rapidly, and as an inevitable weight pressured her to settle next to Hiccup for an eternal sleep, her mind grew more active. A confusing sort of activity where she would imagine her fate in various deviations of ill fortune: sea-dragons that smelled the intestinal ropes and devoured them just short of land. The crude raft breaking apart, spending her final moments panicked, caught in a vain attempt to save Hiccup before succumbing to the depths. Or, the worst and most likely: falling asleep—truly falling asleep as she so desperately wished—and slowly dying from dehydration, never reaching land.

Events slipped in and out of vividness so easily that Astrid would be left blinking, and sputtering, and trying to connect the vision to reality.

Time continued to elude her. She’d nod off—only for a breath or two—but it was enough to strike fear into her heart every time. At one point, she suffered such a scare from a mixed vision that she was nearly positive she’d slept so soundly that she’d left Toothless to navigate an entire night, and had thus missed her opportunity to check their direction and they were, in fact, heading further south.

A daymare so vivid that she *still* feared it had, in fact, come to pass. A ceaseless taste of salt and despair dried out her tongue and confused her senses and had just the right amount of leverage to muddle her sense of reality.

Astrid squinted.

Such as now. Legs aching from the press of rough branches, clothes sticking to her back with sweat and blood and gods-knows what else, Astrid spotted a color other than blue and dark blue and grey. She must have been hallucinating again—as earlier she had sworn she saw a swell of land, even pushed Toothless to approach it, only to find it was nothing. A risen wave, perhaps.

She saw green now. A spot, like before. It blinked in and out with the waves. Perhaps wavering… or perhaps not. It might have been her own lack of stability.

Astrid said nothing to Toothless; she couldn’t bear being wrong *again* and the speck of color was directly in their path. (*North,* she prayed, refusing to address the daymare of losing direction. *They had to be heading north.*)

Instead, Astrid continued with her feeble attempts to paddle, hating her body, hating her situation, draining that hate for power as she used to, when training. A once effective measure, now empty. She ran on fumes and confusion.

The green remained. Unless she was mistaken, unless delirium had set in, they were approaching land. Lush land.

No. Yes. *It was* green. She saw the trees cropping the top of the beach cliff and the pale rock below. She saw varying shades of beige emerge. Browns and whites…

“Oh… thank the… the gods,” she said with a harsh cough.
She looked back at Hiccup. Pale and still.


Something in the distance called. At first, Astrid thought it was the echo of her own stupid talking, muffled by the buzz that wouldn’t leave her head. Or a bird; damn birds seemed to follow her everywhere. But she was pretty sure words had been involved. She must have heard a word. Familiar wards. Plain Norse… but not her own…

Another shout. A voice. Someone else’s voice. Dampened by distance but discernable as human.

_Humans_.

_Help._

Astrid might have sobbed with relief if it wouldn’t have broken her delicate torso.

Then panic set in.

Humans. People. Dragon.

She had a _dragon_ with her.

“ Tooth—” she coughed, “—less. Tooth, you got—”

Did she finish speaking? She couldn’t tell. The buzzing in her ears grew louder. She felt like someone was holding cotton tightly against her head; the heat increased. Vertigo overpowered her.

The dragon came closer through her blurring vision. Astrid saw him take the saddle in his mouth and drag it back into the water with him. Hiccup, resting on the seat in the weakest form of cushion, nearly slipped into the water with him but Astrid draped herself across the boy to keep him with her.

She felt her lips move. She felt the raft tip with the shifting weight. She hoped she was holding onto Hiccup. She hoped she wasn’t crushing him, killing him faster.

She saw Toothless swimming away, his dark head nearly invisible amidst the waves.

She looked across the seas. Broad daylight. Was it enough?

The island never seemed to get any closer, even as the day passed quicker than Astrid could keep up with. Growing darker, and darker, and darker…

    ######

    ######

“Let’s see how fast she is—”

“Atta’ boy, Toothless.”
“Come on—bud!”

“Hang on, Astrid, we’re going to do something crazy.”

“Trust me!”

“Hold, Toothless.”

“Now!”

“No…”

“—No—!”

“‘Ere you are. Drink up—easy! Easy, easy. No need to lose that water.”

Astrid must have been dying. She was in the fires of Muspelheim. Thirst was a blade in her throat and a Jötunn sat on her chest. Her arms wouldn’t move and her skin burned and oozed, slick with something poisonous and heavy.

Shadows shifted around her like the dragon Queen climbing from her grave and Astrid wanted to scream.

Instead, something pressed to her lips; her body moved at the first slip of moisture. Water.

“‘Atta girl. ‘Atta girl. You’re okay.”

She couldn’t stop. Days of thirst mounted—it had to have been days—and Astrid drank greedily from the offered cup. It was empty in two and a half sips.

Her neck was bent, her head cradled by a large hand, thick fingers pressed against her sweaty scalp. She pushed the empty cup back, blindly, with her nose to chin wet, in a silent request for more.
The hand on the back of her head (how had she not noticed it immediately?) guided her into a seated position.

“There you go. You’re okay, see?”

She was. She was okay. She was in a house. Door in sight—directly across—with light filtering through the cracks.

Daytime? Likely.

Table. Chairs. Hearth. The mainstay of someone’s home. She sensed the wall directly to her left and a person to her right.

Astrid could breathe, painfully.

She could sit. Think.

She was alive.

Things cleared quicker. She was on a bed of hay, bristles poking at her thighs. A makeshift bed, if she were to guess, but comfortable enough, and under a pile of blankets.

A quick glance to her right showed her a man. Grey, short beard and faded, blonde hair cut to his neck with a stiff, receding hairline to pronounce an already wide forehead. He had a thin nose, crooked downward and likely broken once or twice in his lifetime, and a set of grey eyes, the left one noticeably paler, leaving Astrid to wonder at its potency.

“I…” Words hurt—not like before, where they clawed their way up her throat and left her mouth—but like a hammer to her temple with each syllable. “Hic—the boy?”

No names.

Astrid wanted to save explanations for another day, she wanted to drop back into a fitful sleep (It wasn’t enough. Whatever she got, it wasn’t enough), but something ingrained in her gut and pride, something instinctual or taught, warned her about being too liberal with information.

Berk had enemies. Enemies from the old days. Most tribes let blood feuds die as the dragon war grew, but others hadn’t.

Astrid didn’t know which island she had landed on or what tribe settled there and she wasn’t about to let every ounce of suffering and effort go to waste with a mere slip of the tongue.

The man handed her a fresh-filled mug of water and Astrid grasped it with strengthened fingers.

“That lad you were with? Aye. He’s alive.”

Alive?

Astrid held the cup to her lips, waiting for the inevitable ‘but not for long.’

Sure enough, under her inscrutable stare, the man sniffed, scratched his cheek, and added, “For now.”

Astrid waited again, drinking slower. He seemed to take silent prompts well enough, for which Astrid was glad; speaking sent a thunderous spike of pain through her head.
“He’s sick,” the man went on. “It’s not looking good. And his leg—it’s... Well, you seen it.”

His message wasn’t comforting, but something in his voice was. The tone or the tenor or the way he paced his words.

“Can I see him?” Her own voice seemed to prick her ears.

“He’s here.” He leaned back and Astrid caught a peek of fur piled onto a bed.

The man straightened again and Hiccup—or what was meant to be Hiccup—was shielded once more. Astrid hadn’t the mobility to twist around the broad (and too close, if she were to be honest) shoulders.

“Let me—” she began.

He placed a hand on her chest and pushed down. Astrid felt herself being forced back against hay.

“Rest.”

“Just—!"

“You’re unwell. And dehydrated,” he said in his even, deep voice. “Drink, and sleep. You can see your friend when you next wake.”

Astrid felt a surge of panic, of hopelessness, and then it evaporated. Perhaps she was too dehydrated to cry. She couldn’t save the chief’s son. She likely couldn’t save herself.

She fell back into a fitful sleep, a thousand different scenarios playing through her mind of how she would get back to Berk and what she could say to her chief when she returned with no Hiccup.

“What’s your name, lass?”

“Astrid…” she mumbled.

Shit. Shit, shit.

“I’m Hackett. Chief Hackett.”

When Astrid next awoke, it wasn’t to Hackett.

She peered to her right, straw and hair crackling against her ear, to find her view of Hiccup unimpeded. He was still a mass of blankets atop a bed, but she could make out the white strip of his brow between coarse fur and dark hair.

It took another moment for her to sense someone else in the room.

A woman busied herself at the hearth. Astrid could barely see through the bleary film of sleep.
clogging her eyes, but the swish of clothes and tall, rounded shape gave the impression of a woman with hair too dark to be Hackett.

The figure opened the door—light flew inward; the sounds of life and village, both painfully nostalgic, rolled across Astrid’s ears like a splash of cold water—and stepped outside.

When the door closed, the outside world closed as well. The room went dark.

Astrid waited and listened. A fire crackled in the hearth and something in the kettle cooked. Leeks, possibly.

She moved. Her bladder had an uncomfortable fullness that made shifting upward a vexing endeavor with her thirst equally demanding. Her arms shook. Her body seized and cramped, breaking free from the stiffness of sleep but falling prey to the lack of support.

She pulled her legs out from the blanket and blinked at their bareness, as though the prickle of hay into her calves had been in her subconscious all along, trying to warn her. She glanced over her body and saw a short tunic, loose and undyed. Fresh, thick bandages ran up her arms. Parts of her face felt stiff and wet and when Astrid pressed a ginger touch to her forehead she felt a cool mass of clay. The sour stench of a butter-based salve met her nose.

She inhaled, shallow, out of habit. Then exhaled.

She was being cared for. *They* were being cared for.

They were saved.

Gratitude granted her the mettle to climb to her feet. Everything in her body hated her. *Everything.* She first felt the stab of pruning shears batter her lungs as a candid reminder of her still-broken ribs. Pain clamped against her temples and the room spun, lurching more and more as she rose. Her ankle, padded with support, burned with the pressure. Her legs shook under her weight and her arms were little better; she gripped wood and wall, uncertain as to what she used as a crutch and uncaring. Her stomach puckered and heaved, as though the motion were enough to instigate nausea, and Astrid held her position, clamping her parched throat and speared lungs until she was sure she could move without collapsing.

She approached the bed in crippled movements—three steps, or four—until she stood over the heir of Berk.

The furs were drawn up to his collar so that only his head and thin neck were exposed. His skin looked paler than she recalled, scratches darker than ever with crust, and healing with the plastered, blue salve dried against his neck. Once again, his chest barely seemed to move, his mouth parted and slack, eyelids static and unburdened by dreams. If it weren’t for the perspiration dampening his hairline, Astrid would have thought him dead at first glance. His leg was beneath the obscene pile of furs along with the rest of him; they—their saviors—were trying to break his fever but Astrid knew what they likely did as well: It was futile.

Hiccup was going to die.

Astrid reached out and brushed the tips of her fingers against his clammy brow. The tremble in her legs grew. Her stomach plunged, heavy and sick.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered and regretted it immediately. The words were an admission, a final sweep of hope’s crumbled remains so that nothing impeded the window to reality.
Astrid couldn’t save him—Berk’s heir, Stoick’s son, the last of his family.

She had failed.

“So, who is he?”

Astrid whirled. The shriek on her lips died as quickly as it came when sharp agony tore through her side. With a quiet grunt, she fell.

Hackett caught her, miraculously, managing to cross the room faster than she’d ever known a man of his broad stature to move.

“Easy, lass,” he said softly. One large hand braced her back and helped her regain balance. As soon as she had her weight back under control, he stepped back to a respectable distance. “Walking alright?”

“Yeah,” Astrid said, heart hammering in her throat. Something moved in the corner of her vision and she glanced past Hackett’s shoulder. The man stepped to the side to clear her vision.

“I’ve brought Irpa with me,” said Hackett. “She’s our best in healing, and’s taken care of you two.”

Astrid’s eyes fell to the woman who followed Hackett in. Hardly a woman, she realized once her eyes adjusted to the figure. More a girl, not much older than herself.

Astrid hated thinking it, but Irpa was an unfortunate looking Viking. The skin on her face seemed to sag, spotted, with a sallow, unhealthy hue. She had barely any chin, sunken eyes, and a rather short forehead. Her hair was frizzled and white, and Astrid wondered if it was breeding or trauma that stole its color.

“Thank you,” Astrid choked out, eager to keep from staring too long. She grabbed the hem of her short tunic in a fist and tugged downward. It barely reached her knees.

“Pot’s by your place,” Irpa said in response. Astrid followed the dismissive hand and it still took her a moment to realize Irpa referred to a black chamber pot nestled between the haystack and the wall.

“Thanks,” she muttered again, wondering if her discomfort were that obvious.

“Here—” Hackett stopped his advance as soon as Astrid moved away. He made a slow gesture to her hay bed. “Take a rest and Irpa will look at you.”

Astrid felt she didn’t have much choice. She wanted the strangers gone and the privacy to relieve herself. She wanted the answers to questions she couldn’t quite form yet. The immediate threat of death had lifted and in its wake grew an unsettling peril of unknown.

Hackett didn’t wait to watch Astrid shuffle the few steps to the hay pile. He walked to the cooking area, swiping a mug from the table on his way to the hearth and ladled something from the kettle, kept warm by heated coals beneath.

Astrid pulled her knees in and covered her legs with the blanket, eyeing Hackett as he took a knee beside her. She caught Irpa moving around Hiccup from the corner of her eye before Hackett stole her attention once again, holding the mug out.

“’Ere. Wife’s made it. Should help fill you up a bit.”
Astrid peered inside. Steam moistened her face and the smell of oil and salt hit her. A watery broth, it seemed, but better than nothing. She took it, brushing the large, dry hands and relishing in the contact. She missed people. It had only been a day or two and she ached to interact.

“So, can you tell me what happened?” Hackett asked. “We found you half-dead on that pile of sticks like nothing we’d ever seen before.”

Astrid, who had been trying to peer over Hackett’s shoulder to better see Hiccup’s condition when Irpa pulled back some blankets, blinked.

“We were…”

She couldn’t tell the full truth. She couldn’t tell them about Toothless.

Hackett must have assumed her pause for hesitance, perhaps trauma, because the heaviness of his brow seemed to lighten and his voice went soft.

“Can you try?”

He had an earnest face, this chief. Shaved to his preference—peppered stubble that reminded Astrid of Snotlout’s father—with a stern, but expressive brow. He could read people and he responded to them.

Astrid wet her lips and, feeling homesick and tired and desperate, decided to take a leap of faith.

“We’re from… Be—”

She saw it. Pinned to the rafters, amidst antique, chipped swords and left of a tapestry depicting ancestral battles.

A shield with the Reef Warrior symbol.

Her stomach plummeted, not only with the confirmation that they were more west than she feared, but the clan itself.

Through the painful hammering in her throat, Astrid felt a sliver of thankfulness towards her father for forcing her to memorize the blood-feud handbook. Reef Warriors were allied to the Lava Louts. Heavily. And the Lava Louts were Berk’s greatest enemy. A rivalry that stuck through the Dragon War to the present day.

It could have been a victory trophy; a relic of a great defeat (perhaps they shared a common enemy?) but Astrid couldn’t take that chance.

“—y the gods, I-I can’t remember!”

She turned away as best she could and placed a hand to her face. Through a blear of panic Astrid noted that she still felt a little warm.

“You can’t...?” Hackett sounded skeptical. Astrid felt the air shudder in her chest.

“I… I don’t know where I’m from!” It wasn’t hard to feign her own shock. Her body felt alight with the knowledge of finding herself stranded on an enemy island, with the challenge of getting home, with the horror of the entire situation.

She wasn’t safe. They weren’t safe.
Hackett leaned forward, elbows on his knees, angled, grey eyes growing impossibly wide.

“I’ve heard of such things. Those afflicted with memory loss…” He leaned around, “Irpa, that’s a thing, innit?”

“Sure is,” Irpa replied with a surprisingly melodic voice that didn’t match her face.

“What can you remember? Can you try?”

“I…” her eyes darted around and Astrid wished she was well enough to pace. Energy bottled up in her chest, her legs shook. At least she managed a picture of distress. “We were… a ship! Our ship was attacked!”

“Ah, dragons.”

“No,” she uttered before she could stop herself. Astrid took a breath. It had to end somewhere. “Not dragons. People. Another ship.”

“Who?”

“I—” She didn’t want to start a war. “I can’t remember the sails. They… might have thought we were someone else. Or we sailed into their territory. They were just… on us. It happened so fast.”

Good. This was good. She could do this.

_Gods_. Then why was Hackett narrowing his eyes on her?

“But the raft you arrived on wasn’t part of any—”

“We landed on an island first!” Astrid nearly shouted. Regret flooded her as quickly as the pain did and she hunched with her free hand to her side. She caught Irpa’s glare and ducked her head.

Hackett scratched the scruff of his chin. “And that’s where you were attacked by dragons…”

He said it like he was giving her an opening, even as Astrid eagerly said _no_ again, when she recalled the intestines roping the logs of her raft. And the burns: Dragon fire was different from human fire. Of _course_ they picked up evidence of dragons all over their bodies and arrival. _Shit._

“Ye-ah…” She wasn’t much good at lying; the shame hit her too quickly. Sarcasm, yes. Lying, no. _For Berk. For yourself. Keep it together. You can do this._

She focused on Hiccup. The pallid, disturbing reminder of her situation.

“I… I made it,” she stuttered. “The island, it had no resources, you see. And Hic—cup,” Damn, she gave his name. Too late. “He needed them. Help. So I had to keep moving. And there were dragons there—” There _were_ dragons, Astrid reminded herself, visualizing the Queen and Toothless in an attempt to keep her voice even. “I lost my weapon. I—I did… what I… what I _had_ to a-and —”

The tears were real. The heat behind her eyes and the pressure behind her mouth—there was no faking it. Breathing became difficult. Control slipped.

It had been a nightmare. That night was a horror she would never forget and it wasn’t ending. She had shelter and water and resources, but it continued. It might never end.
Hackett appeared to share Astrid’s alarm.

“Easy girl, easy,” he hushed. “Sorry I pushed you. You did everything you could. You’re a brave lass.”

Astrid rubbed the heel of her palm furiously into her eyes. She didn’t need placating. She needed a level head.

“You can’t save him, can you?” she muttered. She felt sorry for the contempt in her voice; she meant it towards herself. Hiccup would always be her failure. Even if she escaped the island, even if the war did end with that Dragon Queen, she couldn’t save him. She never listened to her mother’s lectures on critical aid. She focused on offense more than defense. Hiccup could have been saved if he had been with anyone other than her.

Hiccup wouldn’t even be in this situation if she had just left him alone and accepted her loss in the games. She’d bear that guilt for the rest of her life… however long that might be.

The tears came faster and the wetness shocked her. The pounding against her temple triggered her temper, her own frustration at her inability to control herself, and she wanted Hackett to stop looking at her.

“Are you—?”

“I’m fine,” she grunted, hating the anger she couldn’t control, hating the lack of control itself. “S-sorry.” She kept her head down, hair over her face and wiped her bandaged arm across her face. It came back smeared with seaweed. “Er…”

“I gottit. Lemme see.” Irpa came shuffling around and all but pushed Hackett to the floor as she knelt on the hay space next to Astrid. Astrid might have laughed if she were in better spirits, but in moving Hackett, Astrid got a clear view of Hiccup. The furs were drawn back and he was covered in bandages. Irpa had turned him and…

Damn it. She hadn’t checked his back. She had dragged him onto that saddle, probably worsening his condition. She hadn’t been thinking.

Irpa grabbed Astrid’s chin with needly, cold fingers and with a surprising strength to twist Astrid’s face. She kept the hold as she dabbed the application off with a foul-smelling cloth.

“Time for a change anyway,” Irpa muttered. Astrid winced at the rough removal. She might not know much about healing, but she didn’t think burns needed to be scrubbed.

“This’ll heal fine if that’s what you’re worried about,” Irpa commented with surprising astuteness to Astrid’s thoughts. “Scar a bit, but you’ll still keep your looks.”

Astrid wished her face wasn’t in the healer’s hands, under the rough treatment. She wished she could look away from those sunken eyes and bird-like nose or pretend to be unbothered by the odd comment, but she had no control of either.

“It’s not what I’m… I don’t care about that,” she muttered.

It wasn’t over yet, a small, cool voice called from the recess of her mind. Maybe Hiccup would perish on an enemy island, but she still had a chance.

Astrid didn’t want to look at Hiccup either. She caught Hackett’s eye. He coughed.
“Ah, anyway,” he spoke, as if prompted by the brief contact. “If you can’t remember just yet, that’s fine—nothin’ to be done for it—but… we don’t welcome strangers too easily. Middle of the Archipelagos? We got enemies at all sides, and that’s not including the dragons. You understand why I’m concerned as to where you’re from, yes?”

“I understand,” Astrid said.

Of course she understood. She was in the very situation he feared. And at the disadvantage.

Irpa released her face and Astrid worked her jaw. The woman shifted around so that Astrid was presented with her back. Spindly elbows jumped as Irpa dug around the inside of her tunic and fished out a tied bag, poured some of the contents into a bowl, and began mashing. Irpa’s back had a twist to it, a curve to the spine that came out when hunched.

Once again, Astrid felt the uncomfortable impulse to turn away. She rubbed her eyes, hoping evidence of her breakdown had been scrubbed away by Irpa’s care.

Hackett, readjusted to his knees to take up the space Irpa moved from, dipped his head. “You alright?”

“Yeah, I—” She took a breath. Irpa crushed away at the mortar. “Thank you,” Astrid said, now, finally, remembering her formalities, “for taking care of us. You didn’t have to.”

“Not so,” Hackett said, rubbing the back of his neck. “Hard to turn away from the pitiful sight you made.”

Astrid wasn’t sure how to respond; if it were a kind or cruel thing to say.

“Still…” Astrid trailed when Irpa spit. Or, it sounded like Irpa spit. She stared at the lopsided back for a moment, dearly hoping the healer hadn’t spit in whatever she pounded at with the pestle, before pressing onward. “You’ve done a lot for us already. We’re not… Entirely welcome, was the truth but it was a truth that didn’t need to be said out loud. It might push them over that fine line between guests and hostages. “We’re… well we don’t know.” She couldn’t think of anything to say. She wanted to pee, drink more water, and take another nap. Maybe she’d feel better with the third time waking. “We’re a problem, I get that. And I’ll do whatever I can to help get us out of your hair.”

Crying, though brief, seemed to have dehydrated her.

“Easy now, I’m not saying—hey!” Irpa scuttled back around like a pale ant and, again, shoved the village chief aside. Before Astrid could so much as crack a smile, Irpa had her clawed nails and cold fingers pinching around the good skin of Astrid’s face.

Astrid twitched when she began applying a new coat of herbs to her burns. She tried not to think about what caused the moisture.

Irpa ignored Hackett’s chin-and-glower combination. His face relaxed into exasperation, and Hackett stood. Astrid decided he must have been well over six feet, but nowhere near her chief’s height.

_Gods, Stoick. Hiccup._

Astrid shoved all thoughts of Stoick away; she’d have plenty of time to go over every possible combination of explaining how Hiccup died to him later.

“Rest your mind,” said Hackett, unaware of Astrid’s internal vexation. “Take a walk outside when
you’re up to it. Finish healing.”

Astrid sniffed, her face still red with every sort of shame, some she didn’t even understand herself. The desire to make up for her display sparked new ideas.

“I could… I could work,” she offered. “Help out? I could pull my weight until Hiccup… gets better.” It sounded foolish. Childish. Astrid regretted saying as much immediately. “Or, you know, until I remember something. Then I could go home.”

Hackett considered her. She could tell he didn’t mind the idea. He seemed like the sort of man who required people to take responsibility for themselves.

“Let me work,” Astrid insisted. “You’ve done so much for me—us—I can’t… I have to do something to make it up.”

“Until you remember,” Hackett said. He glanced at Hiccup. A white face, damp hair, and an incredibly still pile of furs. “For him, I’m sorry. I don’t think there’s much we can do. It would be better if we gave him some poppy and—

“Try!”

She leached with the demand. Irpa dropped a handful of herbs with a hissed, “Foolish child!” but Astrid couldn’t bear to hear him say it and she didn’t know why.

Injustice, she supposed. Hiccup managed to end a war that was killing her home.

If she died on this island, no one would know. No one would know the truth. If, nothing else, she owed it to Hiccup to make it back to Berk and tell his story.

Hiccup wasn’t quite dead yet, and he deserved, at the very least, to have every fighting chance. Not to be let go.

Hackett frowned. “I don’t much like fruitless endeavors.”

“I’ll make it worth your while!”

A bristled eyebrow rose and Astrid flushed.

“Not—! No, I’m a great worker. A great warrior!”

His other eyebrow joined the first. “Warrior?” She could hear something like amusement. “You’re a bit young to have many tales, aren’t you?”

Astrid’s nostrils flared and she fought to keep her voice civil. “I’m injured, but if I were healed, I could challenge anyone on your island.”

What was wrong with her? She was biting off more than she could chew and she knew it. Even at full strength, she had no idea the sort of warriors this island had produced. It was foolish, desperate; she might as well blame it on the fever.

Worse yet, she could see Hackett humoring her with a nearly patronizing smile.

He raised his hands as though staving her off. “I’ll set you up with some chores. Don’t want you straining yourself while you’re healing.”

Astrid jerked away from Irpa when she tried to apply more solution to her face.
“And you’ll do everything to help Hiccup?” She needed an answer. She needed to know they wouldn’t slip Hiccup something and call it an accident just because they didn’t think he was worth the resources.

Hackett held her eye and Astrid got the impression he knew exactly what she feared.

He gave a slow, possibly reluctant, nod. “Aye. We’ll see what we can do.”

Chapter End Notes

Jenna-sais-pas was amazing, once again. She made this comprehensible. Thank you!

Next Chapter: Astrid adjusts to life with the Reef Warriors as Hiccup continues his struggle to survive
Chapter Summary

Astrid gets situated with the Reef Warriors, Hiccup's still unconscious, and Stoick attempts to put the pieces together.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Irpa finished applying new salve, Astrid relieved herself, drank a cup and a half of broth, tiptoed around the space she'd been—where she saw more relics of the Reef Warriors Tribe, inscribed on ornaments and embroidered on clothes—and then slept soundly in the enemy's home for another night.

Ylva, Hackett's wife, greeted her when she next came to.

'Greeted' was a generous interpretation. Astrid finally felt rested for the first time in days, but her patience was put to the test. Ylva, it seemed, didn't have any of her husband's reservation and steady aid.

She was tall, broad-jawed, with dark hair parted down the middle and pulled severely against the base of her skull, where it powdered out into a ball of wild-curls. She was devoid of any status braids, rare but not unheard of, and wore breasted armor as the women of Berk did. She had an energy about her that Astrid might have admired under different circumstances; she didn't stay in one spot for more than a beat before she was doing something else—stirring the kettle, stoking the fire, digging through linens, adjusting the mounted blades...

She didn't ask after Astrid's health; merely made a comment on her wakefulness and asked if she could get up. Ylva had tossed her a tunic and some leggings, which Astrid stiffly managed to dress herself in. The leggings felt a little loose and the tunic's sleeves didn't quite reach her wrists, but she was clothed in something fresh and Astrid felt more human than she had in days.

Astrid was given a drink to gulp down quickly ("I don't like my things leaving the house.") and had a loaf of hard bread shoved in her hand before she found herself thrust out the door with a: "Go on to the bathhouse round back. Get cleaned up and then find Hackett. I gotta clean up that sheep's nest that's taken over my home."

Astrid might have asked about a change of clothes but she figured a drying cloth was all Ylva planned to part with.

"Leave that in the bathhouse," Ylva said without looking at her. "I'll come for it later."

With a forced expression of neutrality and a pained glance at Hiccup—who hadn't changed at all from yesterday, deathly still—Astrid shuffled out the dark-wooded door and away from the harried woman.

Astrid didn't mind going outside; she still felt a bit feverish, but she couldn't possibly sit around any longer. Weakness had set into her bones, bones that protruded more readily with the weight she'd lost.
in the past three days. She felt shaken by the need to exercise; now that most of the immediate pain had left, her mind started panicking about every disadvantage acquired. She could be overpowered, easily. Though the burns were healing and the stretched, pinched feel of her skin hardly gave her pause, her ribs still caused her grief. They wouldn't allow her to run or swing an axe should the situation call for it.

Astrid took her first step out of the house. The sun's touch was a prickling, hot caress, sick and familiar, and vertigo nearly swept her feet out from under her. She recalled an eternity baking under its glare, back on that raft, and swore she could still feel that unseen force crushing her head. The thirst that tore her throat.

The chunks of dry, hard bread she managed to swallow felt like shards against her stomach.

Her nausea settled a breath later as the clamor of work and people mingled with the rolling sea. The noise of village life. Her eyes adjusted and Astrid swallowed, wishing she had the nerve to ask for another drink, before she stepped forward.

The worst part about the Reef Warriors' village was that it wasn't so different from Berk. She could see the usual farmhouses and barricades. An armory and attached forge, black smoke billowing upward, woven with the sound of hammering and chugging bellows. Further down the sloping, grassy hill was a communal well, the surrounding area clear of grass so that shops could be set up and wares sold on Sunnudagr. Fishing huts lined the docks. Children shrieked and chased each other. Vikings leaned against stone hedges and chatted under the warm sun.

They had darker housing here. Darker forests, she supposed, and she wondered at how far south they must have gone for such different trees. The villagers wore lighter clothing. The air was warmer, thicker.

Like on Berk, the chief's house was set a bit higher from the rest of the village. Astrid took a few steps, turned and, sure enough, a bathhouse sat just a hill above the chief's, led to by a short, rocky path veering to the left. To the right, an outhouse could be spotted a ways on the other side.

She made the short walk on quaking calves and entered the bathhouse, making sure to knock first. Inside was a modest, wooden tub filled with lukewarm water. It clearly hadn't been prepared for her, but it was warmer than the air and suddenly Astrid's skin itched under cakes of blood and dirt. The fetor of her own body oils ripened in her awareness, and her hair felt heavy with grime. She needed it off.

Astrid closed the door, giving it an extra push to ensure it wouldn't open on her, and gingerly pulled the short tunic from her body. Unravelling the bandages from her arms showed glossy, puffy patterns marring her skin, erasing her freckles and scars of her youth. They were ugly, some patches red and risen, others white and flaking. She wondered what her face looked like. What her neck looked like. She wondered how much would scar-new and deformed and not at all heroic looking—and tried not to despair. She had no time for vanity. She had to focus on her gratitude and need to survive. She had to.

A small block stool helped her climb the edge of the tub but the action of twisting her body still drew a small hiss. Goosebumps ran up her body as the cool water consumed her but the temperature felt perfect for her burns. Heat would have seared, she realized. It would have been agonizing. Perhaps the cooler temperature had been on purpose. Astrid entertained the thought that Ylva had done this consciously, considerately, before recalling the woman's inhospitable behavior and deemed it more likely as fortunate neglect.

She dunked her head a couple times and scrubbed soap set at the bath's edge through her hair. The
despair of earlier returned, that horrible streak of vanity. No longer pressed to survive, Astrid had no choice but to acknowledge the outcome.

She was missing some. Her hair. The left side of her scalp felt uneven and short, noticeably where the burns were worst, with her hairline pulling back more than she remembered. The water blackened and clumps of coppery tresses floated around her shoulders. She gathered a wad and threw it out of the tub, choking back a similarly-sized lump that formed in her throat.

*No time for vanity.*

Astrid scrubbed more softly down her body. The paste cleaned off but she did little more to her arms, legs, face and neck. A couple scabs flecked off in her effort to clear up her skin, but otherwise Astrid managed to remove most of the ash, dirt and salt that had crusted onto her body.

The water woke her up. Thoughts of Berk came, unbidden, to mind. She thought of the last bath she took—the day before her showdown with Hiccup—in a familiar setting, with all her effects. Other than that, she'd only had the opportunity to scrub the dirt off her face and arms in the family basin before following Hiccup into the forest.

Astrid remembered her anger of that moment, how her skin flared red, and not only for having been treated so roughly with a sponge stone. She remembered how she hypothesized as she stalked Hiccup. How she half expected to find Gobber in those forests, or one of the old-timers who could no longer fight, giving preferential treatment to the heir.

Instead, she had found a dragon.

Astrid snorted. Then winced.

Something shifted. A shadow. Astrid lifted her head and saw some of the light at the crack of the door blocked.

"Hello?" she called.

For a moment, nothing moved. She could hear the *drip-drip* of water falling from her elbow into the dingy bath.

Then the shadow shifted again. Tall. A body just outside the door. Astrid waited, shoulders hunched, but the person seemed to be retreating. She could hear the faint crunch of dry soil and stone taper off.

It must have been Ylva, seeing if Astrid still bathed. Or Hackett.

Or someone waiting to bathe…

Astrid gripped the edge of the bath and paused a little longer. The shadow didn't return. The thin stream of light remained unimpeded.

She was clean enough. Water sloshed as she climbed out of the bath, slower than she had gotten in. The shaded air chilled her, like glue to her joints, and she moved even slower. Her feet found matted ground and Astrid padded over to the drying cloth. She quickly patted the water from her body, keeping her back to the wall and her eyes on the door. Pulling on her clothes involved a lot of hissing, a lot of pauses and slow breaths. Her hair clung to her back and soaked the rest of her tunic. Her burns felt raw and exposed. Forget what Ylva wanted; she needed to find Irpa first.

Shivering, Astrid opened the door and warily looked around. She saw no one nearby. Only the villagers, far below.
People stared as Astrid slowly plodded across packed dirt on the thin, cloth shoes she'd been given. This island wasn't Berk. The village was smaller. The land was less grassy—though what grass she did see was tall and dry, and she imagined dragonfire cost the Reef Warriors fields at a time. She spotted a couple pastures with sheep and goats and several rotated gardens as she moved towards the lower rungs of the community. No yaks.

The sun warmed her immediately. Unlike earlier, her skin gave a pleasant hum at its touch. The bath seemed to have done her some good after all.

Astrid understood what Hackett meant about his village not taking kindly to strangers. Perhaps Berk had simply grown complacent towards people, being so involved with the dragon war, but this island seemed to regard Astrid as something new and dangerous. Someone who should be kept at bay.

Backs turned as she passed. People stared from afar. No one bothered to be polite about passing whispers to their neighbors.

Astrid grit her teeth. She hobbled to the first person who made eye contact with her—a woman working at bucking what appeared to be wolf hide. Her complexion seemed closer to Ylva's, even without the shade of the tannery, with dark, brown hair pulled back in sharp braids and half-covered by a cap. She didn't seem much older than Astrid.

The girl's regret was evident. She bent over her work and brushed the rough leather with vigor.

"Excuse me," Astrid called politely, stepping closer so she couldn't be ignored. "Can you tell me where Irpa is?"

The girl's arms continued to work, but she gave Astrid the consideration of her attention. After a quick up-and-down glance that had Astrid tugging up the loose-waisted leggings, the girl pointed over her shoulder. Astrid followed the finger—from her lower position, she could see another house nearly level to the chief's, only to the far left of the village, nestled into a crook of the surrounding forest as though it had been purposefully cleared. The house was considerably smaller, with an oddly flat roof and a large, surrounding garden. Smoke billowed up from a centered smoke hole.

"Thank you."

The girl nodded and returned to her bucking.

Astrid started her journey back upward, moved along the winding, stony paths to Irpa's residence. She welcomed the separation from the village. She'd never been *on the outs* before, anywhere. She'd never felt the heat of suspicion or a glare on her back. Not one she hadn't deserved, anyway. It was isolating.

But she understood. She couldn't fault these people, even when they were no allies of Berk, for distrusting her. She couldn't indulge in any sort of umbrage, even as she felt it coil in her gut, building. She hoped it fizzled out before she did something that would lose them their sanctuary.

The walk winded her. By the time she made it to the gardens her leg muscles ached and her side splintered with the inhalations her lungs demanded, leaving her unable to appreciate the quaint prettiness of the bistre cottage.
Irpa opened the door on the first knock. She squinted up at Astrid, noting the wet hair and exposed injuries, then sighed.

"Yeah. Yes. Come on in." Irpa walked back into the house.

Astrid blinked, then followed.

She didn't want to shut the door behind her, not with the earthy, potent smell striking her senses, stuffy and overpowering. She tried to breathe through the thick atmosphere of herbs and medicines, focusing on the source of the smoke she saw earlier—a roaring, central hearth, circular with white stones.

Irpa emerged from a side room with, not medicinal herbs, but a cloth, and tossed it at Astrid. Astrid managed to grasp it before it struck her face.

"Wrap up your hair," Irpa ordered. "I didn't fix you up just to have you die of the freezing sickness." She moved to the other side of the room adding, "Shirt off."

Astrid hesitated for only a second. She stepped sideways from the shut door, remembering the displaced light of the bathhouse. The chill of earlier returned even before she pulled the tunic off. In the light of the hearth she could better see the dark bruises wrapping up her left side and the blistered, cracked skin of her arms.

She released the air from her lungs to bend quickly and toss her hair into the towel. The damp skin of her back sent goosebumps rushing down her front.

She glanced down and grimaced. "Can I… can I trouble you for a bind?"

Astrid knew she hadn't much of a chest, but she'd gotten used to wearing support with her active lifestyle. She yearned for the support. Or at least the familiar pressure...

Irpa turned from the pestle she beat at and, with a nearly hairless eyebrow, sent Astrid a look that had her crossing her arms. The woman rolled her eyes, dropped the mortar, and shuffled off into a side room.

Astrid waited, feeling foolish and exposed. She distracted herself with the room. The area reminded her of Gothi's a bit—overrun by dried herbs rather than weapons. She spotted the Reef Warrior symbol etched in clothes and carved into support beams. She saw a weave in one corner of the room and cloths piled on the eating table. The hearth continued to roar, casting everything in orange light and long shadows, but nothing cooked. The day was warm enough without a fire going; Astrid wondered if Irpa simply ran cold for a viking.

Small bowls lined the pearly hearth rocks. Astrid shuffled closer, bearing the sear of flame near her burns. Some of the bowls contained dozens of blackened, curled leaves. Others gently smoked from their proximity to the fire. One shined with pale liquid. A quick sniff confirmed what Astrid sensed was butter.

"This might be a bit big for you—" Astrid suppressed a scream. She straightened, whirling to find Irpa right behind her, breast bind in hand. Irpa carried on, heedless to her fright, "but I don't think your rib'll handle the smaller one."

Astrid hadn't the mind to feel angry. She reached for the bind gratefully. Irpa slapped her hands away.

"I'll do it," Irpa said, brusque. "Get down, lift your arms, and expel the air from your lungs."
Astrid obeyed, getting to her knees and holding her arms over her head, blowing her breath out. Her ribs disagreed strongly with the lifting of her arms, but she ignored it as Irpa pulled the bind down, twisting it over her chest. She went so far as to adjust Astrid's breasts within the cloth with her freezing, needle-like fingers.

"Don't need you messing up everything I've done," Irpa carped under her breath, perhaps feeling, for once, she needed to explain herself.

Odd how Irpa could speak to her as though talking down but Astrid felt none of the sting she had from Hackett or Ylva. Perhaps her gratitude colored her opinion of the woman. Or maybe it was her similarity to Gothi, despite their massive age difference.

"Good?"

"Yeah," Astrid sighed, settling her arms. She twisted the cloth a bit when Irpa turned her back to her. The woman had been right; it was a bit loose. But it felt better than nothing and Astrid hadn't felt comfortable asking Ylva for one. She doubted Ylva had one that would fit her, let alone willing to lend.

"Stay down there," said Irpa. "I'll re-apply your salves."

Irpa picked up the oiled, wooden bowl Astrid had sniffed earlier—the one filled with melted butter—and swilled the contents. She took a handful of powdered root, and sprinkled it in by the gnarled fistful.

"Knew you'd be by," Irpa spoke, absently reaching somewhere behind her and emerging back with a fat-ended spoon. She gave the mixture a few vigorous swipes and the sour edge of the butter strengthened. Irpa rapped the spoon against the edge of the bowl and Astrid could see the thick, dark paste it had become.

Irpa scuttled, almost too fast to track, from the hearth to Astrid in less than a step, the spoon gone, the bowl balanced in the crux of her elbow. She had Astrid's jaw captured, head turned to stare at a windowless wall, before Astrid could make any utterance.

The paste felt warm and sticky, applied with a sense of harsh urgency, but Astrid's prickled burns were immediately soothed.

"Bath make you feel better?" Irpa asked.

Astrid blinked as the solution was dabbed close to her left eye. "Do you care?"

"Not particularly."

Astrid would have conceded with a nod if her chin wasn't subdued. Irpa didn't mince words, she would give the woman that much. Perhaps that's why Astrid tolerated the way she spoke and handled people. Her odd appearance didn't hurt either. There was something forgivable about eccentricities in eccentric-looking people.

Seeing Irpa shove her chief to the floor yesterday had been as entertaining as it was telling. This tiny, odd woman had to have some sort of pull in the village. Her good side, if it existed, was something Astrid wanted to remain on.

Little else was said as Irpa applied the paste to Astrid's arms and neck. Fresh bandages followed. Then her tunic.
"Roll up your legging there and let me re-bandage your ankle."

Astrid stuck out her foot. The swelling had gone down considerably, as had the pain, but the bruising remained. Irpa grabbed her heel with bloodless fingers and clicked her tongue.

"Healing fine but aggravated," she began a quick, tight wrap around the joint that had Astrid wincing. "I'm sure I have a crutch for you somewhere."

Astrid shook her head. "I don't need it. I made it up the hill—"

"I noticed," Irpa deadpanned. "Foolish."

"Sorry."

"Also, can't do much for your ribs other than tell you to take it easy."

"I know."

"Will you take it easy?"

"Yes."

It came out more like a question, but that could have been the knowing stare Irpa had her pinned by.

"Need a bind for your hair?"

"Oh," Astrid ran her fingers through the frizzed, half-damp locks, now thicker on the right. "If you have one…"

Irpa turned, grabbed a tie off the table, and handed it to Astrid.

Astrid only tied it in a low ponytail. The burnt, uneven hairs on the right were impossible to pull back but Astrid was thankful enough for the weight off her shoulders.

"Thank you," she said, remembering herself. "For...for all this."

Irpa waved it off. "Just don't go messin' yourself up."

"Know where I'll find Hackett?"

"Downhill."

Astrid snorted. Helpful.

It must have been noon when Astrid ventured into the village again. And though the sun's position had shifted, the villagers hadn't. They still slowed in the streets, still stepped away and turned their backs and sent perceptible side-glares over their shoulders as she walked.

She passed a pair of children who sat stock-still on a stone hedge...until one of them broke formation and whispered something into her partner's ear. The other's giggles followed Astrid down the hill, striking her back hard enough to raise the hair on her neck.
Not all Reefs were unwelcoming. Some nodded to her. One or two smiled. One, short, rather dumpy man stood as she passed and murmured a prayer.

She must have looked a sight; pathetic, she would imagine, with the healing plaster on her face and her arms wrapped. Slow moving and slightly hunched, an uneven gait... She walked like Irpa. Astrid avoided looking into a watering trough as she passed. She didn't want to know. It was easier not to know.

Hackett spotted her first. Astrid caught him waving at her from atop the roof of a longhouse. The sloped top lacked its shingling around a rather large hole that, if Astrid were to guess, appeared Gronkle-sized.

Hackett said something to a man standing next to him and handed off a hammer.

"Ah, there she is!" he called as Astrid approached. Three other villagers turned; two men and a woman. The woman was older, probably the matriarch of the broken house, but the boys were likely around twenty, still thin from boyhood with short, sparse beards. All three stared and stepped back to give Astrid the sort of space one would with a leper. None uttered a greeting.

Hackett climbed down the ladder, hopping the last few rungs with boyish vigor. He passed the family with a pat on the tallest's shoulder.

"I'll see you boys later, okay? Astrid, this way."

Astrid followed, feeling their censorious stares against the back of her neck with growing reception.

"How are you feeling?" Hackett asked.

"Good." Sore and constrained would have been more accurate, but compared to the last two days she did feel good. Great, even. She could walk. She could breath easier. She wasn't on the brink of dehydration. "Met your wife," she added.

Hackett kept his gaze ahead but Astrid caught the twitch of his lips.

"I can see that," he said. "Clothes fit?"

She nodded. "Well enough."

Astrid decided that she rather liked speaking with Hackett, despite everything. It was easy, at least, with him being a simple but direct talker.

Feeling direct herself, she asked, "Could I have... can I help with that roof? Back there, I mean. I'm not a carpenter or anything, but I'm decent with repairs."

Hackett glanced behind him, back at the house they moved further and further from, and then forward again, right over Astrid's head, never looking at her.

Astrid tried not to feel stilted. "It's something I can help out with," she added, "like we discussed..."

"Don't think you're up for it," he said.

Astrid caught a flash of white when she looked down—the bandages raveled around her burns. She made a conscious effort to keep from swinging her arms too much.

"You wouldn't know unless you give me a shot," she muttered, feeling mulish.
Hackett might have cracked a smile at that, but Astrid's attention by then had fallen to the shore. To the familiar glitter capered along choppy waters and the heavy, salted air. If she closed her eyes it would sound like Berk—right down to the creaking, sodden ship bellies yanking on their lines and bumping against docks.

They turned down a steeper path towards the stone quay. There was a lot of stone, Astrid noted. Hedges and foundations and fences—more stone than wood. More than she was used to for a village.

"Chief," a passing boulder of a man greeted, looking nearly seven feet tall with most of his face hidden by dark, coarse hair. He carried a mace over his shoulder and a block of raw stone underarm.

"Sod," Hackett nodded back.

Astrid went ignored by Sod, but she followed his movements, watching as he turned away from the village well and toward the smithy. He had a light and fluid grace for such a large man and an incredibly sure grip on that weapon.

A good person to get to know, should their stay prolong. Perhaps someone she could learn from. If he was a smithy, great. Weapons' care was something she could stand to evolve in. Even so, the way he carried himself told her he knew how to fight—

You're not on Berk, Astrid reminded herself harshly. This was an unfriendly tribe to Berkians and if they ever found out they had Berk's heir…

She nearly missed Hackett considering her.

"What?" she asked, though she realized he must have noticed her staring at Sod. No reason to pretend otherwise.

"You say you're a fighter?"

"Yes," Astrid answered shortly. She could make out Hackett nodding in her peripheral.

"Not much good in your condition," he said and Astrid's jaw clenched. She knew that. She didn't need to hear it out loud. "I'll set you to some menial work."

"And you'll take care of Hiccup?" she reminded him.

Now it was Hackett who looked ahead, taking the short, final steps to the jetty almost quicker than Astrid's weakened leg could follow.

"I said we'll do what we can, and we will," he replied, peering down the line of boats. "Fisk!"

They walked along the bottom docks of the wharf towards a man hauling a half-full net of wriggling tails off a fishing boat. A couple lean-tos were set against the high, stone wall—vented canvas supported by thin, dark posts, slick with algae. Hooks and nets hung from horizontal beams. A dozen barrels sat inside along with a couple short stools and blunt-tipped spears. The scent of fish grew more potent as they approached.

Astrid glanced out to sea, squelching down memories that threatened to return by the twinkling, dark spread ending in a foggy horizon.

Where was Toothless?
The dragon might have drowned, even if he had proven himself a capable swimmer. He might have been caught and killed, too close to the small, human-riddled island, though Astrid was sure she would have heard of it by now. Still, she thought it best not to bring up the possibility of a large, black dragon sighting. No need to raise the alarms.

A painful sinking weighed in her stomach that did not agree with the bread she ate earlier. Beyond a dragon, Astrid could see nothing but water. Nothing. No land or shadow in sight. No string of islands to hop over to, not like with Berk.

Not from her angle, anyway. She would have to find another opportunity to explore the island and see what she could make out from another direction. Surely, the Reef Warriors couldn't be that remote. Maps were often inaccurate for distance, but there had to be something visible—

A sharp, wavering whistle whipped through Astrid's introspection.

Blinking, Astrid found both Hackett and the fisherman staring at her. Heat flooded her cheeks so quickly she thought she might blister again.

"Oh," she muttered. "Sorry."

Hackett said nothing of her distraction and gestured to the thick-necked man at his side, who, though younger, might have been a whole head taller than Hackett. He had skin as dark as Ylva's, likely darker, with a boxy jaw and wide mouth that grinned down at her. His deep brown hair had a shine to it—likely oil—and was pulled back to show a matching shade to his eyes.

"Astrid, this is Fisk," Hackette introduced. "He's one of the best fishermen we have 'round here. Family owns half the ships moored."

Fisk sniffed, the smile slipping from his face, and spit over his shoulder into the water behind.

"Not near enough hands to be bought though," he rumbled, dragging his own up his pant-legs before holding one out to Astrid.

Astrid took it and tried to grip back with a force equal to the thick fingers. Fisk's smile returned, though Astrid couldn't quite make relax at his show of friendliness. There was something about the way his eyes jumped all over her face, an uncomfortable eagerness.

Hackett dropped a hand on Astrid's shoulder and she fought not to immediately shrug it off. He might have felt her tension because he gave her one quick pat and removed it.

"Astrid here'll help you," he said to Fisk.

Astrid blinked. Then glanced around the wharf. Truthfully, they were rather remote, having walked away from the bustle of the main port to the very end of the wide dock where it reeked of fish.

"Here?" she asked.

"Yep," said Hackett. "Fishing is important to us." Fisk gave an accompanying nod. "You want to pull some weight? Do as Fisk tells you." Hackett looked over Astrid's head and said to Fisk, "Send her my way when you're done with her."

Fisk gave a quick solute. "Will do."

He left. Without so much as a parting word, Hackett had passed Astrid off like an unwanted burden. She supposed she was, but a fleeting sense of loneliness struck her as the chief moved away and she
hated it. She wanted to be up there, with people, even if they were distant and distrusting.

"So," Fisk began, turning that wide, benign smile on her, "you're the gal from the other day."

Ugh. Small talk. He knew she was…

Astrid nodded anyway.

"My boat here's the one that got you." Fisk jabbed a thumb at one of the single-sailed long boats on a short moor. His voice was as heavy as his jaw, deep and loud. His chest swelled as he spoke but all it did was bring attention to the tiny gut poking over his belt. If Astrid were to guess, Fisk must have been nearing thirty and not yet learning the consequences of too much Mead; she'd seen it happen with every one of her uncles.

"Thank you." Astrid hoped the gratitude was perceived in her words because she couldn't feel it. Fisk seemed like he was hoping for some sort of praise and went on.

"Yeah, I was already on my way in from a trip and saw you floating along. You were a mess. You and that boy. Looked like you were going to be swept away by that west current and miss us completely if I hadn't caught you."

Astrid had heard men drone on about themselves for ages, she'd developed a lack of interest once a certain triad had been reached, but for the first time since Fisk started talking she had her attention.

"Where would that have taken us?"

He snorted. "Tomorrow. Wrecker Bay if you were really unlucky, which I think you were, being in your condition and all. So what happened?"

Astrid shrugged and picked at a loose bandage on her arm. "Nothing."

*Tomorrow was far.*

"Didn't seem like nothing."

*But if it was west from their position she knew where the northeast end of the island was.*

"Dragons and stuff."

*She knew which horizon to look for.*

Astrid could feel Fisk's eyes on her—that roving look he'd wash her with—and she desperately wished he'd look away.

Fisk shrugged.

"Well, alright. Not gonna force a conversation on a girl who don't want it." He winked, and when Astrid only glared back, shrugged, completely undeterred. He spit to his side, rubbed a finger under his nose, and gestured to one of the lean-tos. "So, I'll keep you in the shade over here…"

He grabbed the basket he had filled earlier and walked under the drooping canvas. Astrid followed and found herself nearly gagging with the malodorous, fishy balm.

She could better see the old netting hanging on the wall, the rusted iron hooks and the three-legged stools. Barrels lined the wall, some with salts, others with fish. There was a table pushed against the stone, upholding baskets. A few flies buzzed around.
"Got our fresh catch here," Fisk said, patting the barrel under arm.

Astrid watched him set the barrel down next to two others before something familiar stole her attention. Something on the table, peaking between two heavy-bottomed baskets. She knew that particular blade-curve, intimately, readily. An axe.

Fisk grabbed it. Astrid tensed, but he only held it loose at his side and reached for a short blade Astrid hadn't seen right next to it. She watched him flip the knife and catch it by the blade.

"Fish need to be de-scaled. Know how?"

Astrid took the knife by its offered handle and pulled back her indignation. "I know how to de-scale a fish, yes."

"Get to it then. Start here," he kicked the basket he set, "And put 'em here." He nudged a barrel with his foot. "I got some work to do on the ship."

And, much like Hackett, he left her.

Fisk came back a couple times throughout the afternoon—bringing barrels and taking them away. He tried to start a couple of conversations but Astrid kept her sentences clipped and short. She was lonely, mulish about being left alone so often, and yet still trapped in an odd, unfriendly sort of mood, offset by everything. It might have been her physical discomfort or her worry over their situation or the heavy distrust shared between her and the villagers.

By the time Astrid was told to head off her lower back felt like it had been taken by a sledge hammer and her fingers were raw and blistered. She'd never get the smell of fish off of her. She bumped into Hackett as she passed the communal well, who had her stop by Irpa's home and get some fresh bandages.

It might have been the dusky bark, or being on an enemy island, but Astrid sensed something ominous about the thicket circling Irpa's home. The setting sun cast long, raking shadows over the garden where Irpa worked, a tiny white speck amidst the dark.

Irpa seemed indifferent as ever to the state of Astrid's hands. She refreshed the bandages around her arms, cleaned up a couple cuts, and scrubbed the paste from Astrid's face and neck. As it was late, Irpa had Astrid keep the salves off her burns for "some fresh air". She was to return in the morning.

Astrid returned to the chief's house as dusk hit; a warm glow came from within so she pushed the door open gently. Heat hit her face, touching her cheeks and fingers with a far more pleasing caress than the sun had.

At first glance she saw no one, just a stoked fire at the hearth and the smell of something with lamb. It was her first time entering the house and from the doorway Astrid could see a set of stairs pressed against the wall of the house, reaching towards a second floor. Ropes and tools hung from the rafters just right of the entryway, creating enough of a curtain—a distraction—so that Astrid had no cause to turn and take a peek at the floor above.

Still, she ducked her head and tried to squint upward. Only darkness greeted her; all the light from the house came from downstairs. Astrid pushed away, moving to the stoked hearth warming the
room and it's simmering pot. Spices and meat wafted through the house and her stomach rumbled. Hunger had officially returned.

She stepped around the stairs, curving more past the meal table towards her resting corner. A quick nap might be good for her.

Astrid nearly jumped out of her skin to see someone hunched over Hiccup, only to realize in a cut and quiet breath, that it was Ylva. The woman had Hiccup's head cradled in one, large hand and tipped a mug against his lips.

Astrid felt her heart stop, the thought of Hackett's implication sharp in memory. Poppy...

She fought the impulse to knock the cup from Ylva's hands. Instead she cleared her throat and said, loudly, hoping her presence would dissuade any of her fears coming to pass, "Hi."

Ylva eyed Astrid, thin eyebrows downturned, and returned to gently tipping broth into Hiccup's mouth.

It had to be broth, Astrid told herself. It had to be what she scented in the air and not an overdose of poppy. Ylva wouldn't dare put Hiccup to eternal sleep in front of her.

A beat passed as Astrid hovered at the foot of the bed, watching Hiccup's throat work through instinct. She took comfort in seeing him move in any way.

Astrid could read a situation as good as any. Ylva didn't favor her. The oppressive atmosphere all but declared Astrid as unwelcome.

"Uh, thank you," she said. Nothing. Astrid took a step closer and cocked her head to better see Ylva's work. "For the clothes. And for taking care of us. You didn't have to."

She glanced over to her bed—her haystack—and noticed it seemed far thinner than it had that morning. Astrid swallowed her pride and her indignation and reminded herself of survival.

"If you want any help around the house, I'd be happy to lend a hand," she offered. She felt a forced smile on her face but she didn't remember attempting one.

Ylva spoke. "We have an upstairs to this place." She used her sleeve to wipe some broth that dribbled from the corner of Hiccup's mouth.

"Yeah, I saw." Astrid tried to sound encouraging. Impressed.

She nearly mentioned homes from her village had them too. Wealthier homes. The chief's for example. She nearly said it to find some common ground with her host. But she couldn't.

"I was upstairs when you were talking to my husband yesterday," Ylva went on. She set the mug on the floor; Astrid made a mental note to sniff it later.

Ylva wiped her hands on the front of her long skirt with a prim, straight-backed posture that spoke of class. She stared ahead, away from Astrid, lips pursed, "I heard what you said to him. You said you'd do anything."

Her voice was cold, mechanical, and dropped into a tone of derision when she said 'anything'.

Astrid felt mortification creep down the back of her neck and spread across her body.
"Oh no, that's not— gods, no!" She pressed a hand to her face, feeling the skin flushed and uneven. "I hadn't meant it—"

Ylva snapped her head around to face her, tied, black hair taking on a severe shine from the hearth. "I can hear just fine. And I heard everything." She stood in a swift, fluid motion, towering over Astrid by a good half-foot. She had a thick top lip to an uneven set that curled as she took a step closer. "I know your type."

_Her type?_ Anger overtook her shame. Astrid's patience had been pressed and thinned in her short time with the Reef Warriors; fear and pain had made her vulnerable to the smallest shift in emotion, and while she knew she had to keep her head down—

Astrid tucked her chin, eyes narrowed. "I don't think you do."

Her fingers itched to close around something. She missed her axe. It was in the cove. It was a lifetime away from her hand.

Ylva strode past Astrid and to the hearth, hands wringing in her skirt. "Pretty things who get their way—"

"I hadn't _meant_ it like that! I told him that. I'm telling you that," Astrid's voice rose against her better judgment.

"I'll get this boy through as best I can," Ylva snapped, "and then you can get the Hel off this island—with or without him."

Astrid shifted her jaw forward, biting back every nerve screaming at her to start swearing.

"With," she ground out. "Or else I might decide to stay."

Ylva turned, firelight flashing in her eyes as her mouth opened.

The door creaked. Hackett stepped in.

"Evening, ladies," he greeted with his attention fully on the clasps holding his cloak to his tunic, his body positioned toward the wall. His voice came off as jovial compared to the cutting words thickening the air seconds before. He shrugged his cloak off and draped it across the nearest high-backed chair. By the time he turned around, both Astrid and Ylva had adopted neutral poses, under some unspoken truce to ease the tension as best they could.

Hackett smiled at Astrid, kissed Ylva, and asked how the day had gone.

The mystery of Hiccup Haddock and Astrid Hofferson's strange disappearance became a village-wide sensation. Theories flew from mouth to mouth. Accusations and rumors mounted. Tales grew wilder as the days passed. The Hoffersons were caught between extreme distraught and embarrassment. Their daughter had disappeared, but the allegations that she was somehow involved with Berk's heir's vanishing—be it romantic or sinister—kept them from venturing into the public often.
The only evidence Berk had implicating any foulplay in the connected disappearance was Astrid Hofferson's axe, which had been found in a cove just off Raven's Point four days after the Final Exam had been cancelled. Before then, the village had been searched and people questioned. When were the teens last seen? Individually and together? What were their last interactions?

Bad, was the consensus. Astrid and Hiccup were hostile to each other in the days leading up to the Final Exam. Someone had seen Hiccup sneaking out the back of the forge, tucking away a couple tools into a fisher's basket. Someone else had seen Astrid stalking in the same direction, both disappearing into the northern woods.

Stoick pressed a hand to his beard. His heart beat too fast these days. He could feel it in his chest and against his throat and in the pads of his fingers. He'd been wired since his son hadn't shown up for the exam; the discovery of Astrid's axe in the remote cove hadn't helped matters.

The basket of Hiccup's belongings—clothing, basic tools, some food—gave the theory of them running off together some plausibility and yet…

No boats had gone missing since the pair had disappeared. It couldn't have been desertion.

Dragons were the foremost explanation. The single explanation Stoick couldn't bear.

Tracking had told them a dragon had been in that same cove. Midnight-black scales littered the area. Claw marks in the dirt. No blood.

It was assumed they were taken with very little struggle. Astrid must have been caught unawares. Dropped her axe and snatched away before she could re-gather it.

No one had quite forgotten the Thorston twins' tale of Astrid murdering Hiccup, much to both the Hoffersons' and Stoick's chagrin. Despite the lack of evidence on Astrid's axe, some still believed there had been a terrible altercation between the two.

Stoick had spent enough time wondering at the relationship of it all. Why Astrid and Hiccup had gone missing at the same time. Why Astrid's axe and a run-away pack full of his son's belongings were found a mile away, in an isolated location, where an unknown dragon had recently been. How it was all connected?

There was a connection. Stoick had all the information, even if he didn't know it. He could feel the pieces, ill-fitting, but all there.

A single, unnamed dragon had not snatched them away. They were not dead. That was not an option.

"Stoh, what are you doing?"

Stoick had heard Gobber coming—he always could, with that familiar clop-pad-clop of the smith's walk. He hadn't bothered to turn his gaze from the horizon. He liked the evening chill against his bare arms; it had always helped calm him, helped him think.

"Air's not the only way someone can get off an island," Stoick murmured.

"No boats have gone missing," Gobber reminded him, coming to stand at his side. "Unless they were building one in secret…"

"We're also not the only ones with boats."
Gobber sighed. "If you're suggesting they were kidnapped..."

A braizer had been already been lit, even if the sky had not yet darkened. Stoick didn't want to see Gobber's face. He didn't want to see the pity or concern.

"And no blood," he added, voice soft.

There was that other oddity. For an area that had dragon marks as well as human, there had been little sign to show a battle had gone down.

Astrid Hofferson would have fought tooth and nail. Hiccup would have made a mess, no matter what the outcome of a fight with him may have looked like.

Stoick twirled the hilt of his dagger in his fingers. He didn't know when he first drew it from his belt. It was dull, in desperate need of sharpening. But Hiccup had been the last one to sharpen it...

Gods forbid he never see his son again—if so, he'd never let another smith touch that dagger so long as he live.

Stoick hated himself for already preparing for the worst.

"Things aren't adding up Gobber," he muttered. The blade glinted fire across his eyes with every spin. "There has to be something else involved."

His family couldn't end like this. Not Hiccup. Not by a dragon. Not snatched and gone... with him unable to do anything...

"So what?" Gobber asked. "We patrol the waters searching for boats?"

"We call our allies."

"Our—Stoick, when was the last time we convened with... with any of them?"

"The Bogs, the Meatheads, the..." Stoick paused.

"Been a while, hasn't it?"

"Look... just..." Stoick spread his fingers across the air, pointing toward every visible island the lightened horizon had to offer. "Even if they were taken beyond these waters, territories will be crossed. No one's getting by the Visithugs here without being spotted. From Bashem to the Bog Burglars, they're trapped. If they were taken, we can still catch them."

"If they're out there, kidnapped," Gobber agreed, emphasizing, "we'll get 'em back."

Stoick rubbed his eyes, right down to his mouth where he held his hand and felt his gaze lose focus.

"Maybe you're right Gobber." He couldn't seem to talk in anything more than a hoarse whisper. Horrified and sickened. "It's been four days, and—"

"Aye, none of that now." Gobber tapped his hook against Stoick's helmet. "Astrid's a fighter. And Hiccup... he's clever, Stoick. Really clever. If they're together, I think they'll be okay."

Stoick nodded along, ears perked and desperate to believe his friend's words.

"Aye. But Stoick…" Gobber hesitated, only for a second, and then pressed on, knowing there was no one else on the island who would say the coming words, "there's still the chance they weren't kidnapped."

Stoick nodded, closing off.

"Then there's nothing to be done for that, but this. This, a kidnapping, a search… This we can do something about. I'm sending out a missive. I want you to prep our messenger hawks."

"We have to find them before winter hits," Gobber warned. The first chill had begun with cloudy mornings and dying harvests. Mobility would be limited soon. Survival, more difficult.


Chapter End Notes

A giant thank you goes out to Jenna-sais-pas for editing! She got walloped this week and still kicked ass!
Chapter Summary

Astrid find Toothless. Or, rather, the other way around.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Vera III

“Careful ‘round this part, here. We got some half-dug trees that just—Here, just, yeah, there ya go,” Fisk dropped the hand that Astrid never took. “Lotta roots, ya know?”

Astrid huffed as she followed the fisherman through the Reef Warrior's eastern forests, her elbow aching, the basket of fish guts chafing against her back.

When she asked why they didn’t just dump them into the water right there at the docks, Fisk explained about a small Sharkdragon problem the village suffered from.

'Best to dump on another side of the island', he’d said with an annoying wink. 'One we don't frequent so much.'

Astrid didn’t question any more, realizing it was a perfect opportunity to see more of the island with limited supervision.

She was growing weary of living on the edge. She wasn’t particularly welcome in Hackett’s house—not by his own wife, at any rate—and if Hackett had sensed the tension between them, he hadn’t acted on it.

Hiccup remained unchanged, but so far Astrid hadn’t detected any regression in his condition, which she considered good enough. Ylva and Irpa both seemed to be looking after him in their free time. Astrid personally wished she could do more but, outside of being near useless for healing, Hackett had done a pretty good job of keeping her busy. Apparently Fisk had given her a ‘glowing review’ and requested she help him more often, so Hackett had her spending most days with Fisk, on his boat, cleaning and gutting fish, fixing net tears, and preparing bait. She managed to spend some time doing laundry too and even, one day, gathered herbs with Irpa, which Astrid considered her most enjoyable use of time. The woman’s brisk behavior didn’t come off as unfriendly, at least.

Everything Astrid had been kept busy with were harmless, menial jobs. She hadn’t been allowed near any weapons and, Astrid was positive, some of the wall decorations in Hackett's house had been removed—possibly moved upstairs. She wasn’t allowed to work with weapons and had never been offered to help in the forge. She knew she never would.

Few people talked to her outside of those she'd been assigned to help. Her longest conversations had been with Hackett. Fisk spoke at her more often than not and, sometimes, in the dead of the night, Astrid would whisper-talk to Hiccup. Silly, pointless thoughts and hopes she couldn't share with anyone else. Things she probably would never share with him had he been conscious. Like how tired she was. And how scared. And the reality that they'd never get home or what she would
possibly do if he died.

Fisk side-eyed her. Astrid knew he was moving slower for her and she hated it. It had been over a week since she met the man and she still hadn’t gotten used to his sad, charitable behavior towards her. She worked so that she didn’t get handouts.

“Got that basket okay?” he asked.

He’d given her the lighter one—smaller, less guts.

“Yeah.”

“How those ribs treating you?”

“Fine.”

“They were pretty bad.”

“I know, I... it’s fine.”

“I was here when they brought you in,” he went on, heedless of her unfriendly tone. “Well, obviously, I got you, but I helped get you situated and all that. Helped Irpa with some of the meds too. I knew a few things from life on the sea. And, lass, you were black and blue all over. Pretty bad looking—”

“They’re fine,” Astrid repeated, but now she stared at Fisk’s back and felt the quietness of the forest all too powerfully. Astrid knew she’d been undressed to be healed. Somehow, this made the way he leered at her more disconcerting than before.

“Still can’t remember where you’re from?” Fisk asked as though he couldn’t sense the narrow stare she had pinned to his shoulders.

“Nope.”

“But you can remember that boy in there?”

“Yeah,” she said. And then, to be safe, “Kinda.”

“You married?”

Astrid crushed the queasy indignation that squeezed her gut. Instead of answering, she sent him a side glare and kept working through the tangle of vines.

Fisk grinned back. “I’ll take that as a no.”

The silence stretched for a few more steps.

“Not even the dead fellow you came with, then? He yours?”

“He’s not dead,” Astrid said, flat,

A whistle broke their step, light flared ahead. Astrid hoped it was the end of their trek through the forest; she still had to walk back with the man. They approached the thinning trees until Astrid was left blinking unfiltered sunlight from her eyes. The greenery ended in a sharp drop—forty feet blow the sea raged against a cluster of jaggy seastacks.
Winds howled at the cliff, sliding through the branches with a pitched and dangerous song. It seemed a treacherous area. Violent waters—thrown at the steep crag with equally violent gusts that could blow a full-grown man right into them. Fisk didn’t seem concerned with the danger. He swung his sack off his shoulder and began dumping its contents downward.

Astrid didn’t care about that, or the Sharkdragons below, flinging themselves at the fallen guts. She cared about the mass she swore she saw on the horizon, dark and fuzzy and blinking in and out between waves.

The village faced south, she knew that much. And they walked east. North should have been the Murderous Mountains (A direction she wanted to avoid at all costs) but east...

East had allies. Directly east should have allies, and it might be a shadow of the Puffin Islands Astrid looked at now.

Unless she and Fisk had only moved slightly southeast, in which it might be the Lava Louts she tricked herself into seeing.

Fisk was still talking as he stood on the edge of the cliff and dumped the contents of his second basket. His words were swallowed by the winds.

Or was it her ears that had suddenly clogged? The hair on the back of Astrid’s neck raised. Her skin prickled beneath her bandages. She knew the feeling of being watched, and it wasn’t Fisk, whose broad jaw continued to work through another tale involving himself and dragons. He leaned over the sharp cliff, slapping the remains down and appearing oblivious to Astrid’s disquiet.

Astrid looked over her shoulder. The tree-line’s outstretched branches shuddered with the force of the sea gales.

“I’ll take yours now,” Fisk said. Astrid faced forward and swung the basket over her shoulder.

“I can—”

Fisk snatched it before she could finish.

Resentment sparked, but before Astrid could raise her voice her suspicions went off again. This time, when she turned around, Astrid saw a face in the swaying treetops. Eyes that sparked in the shadows; glossy and green in the darkness, catching sunlight.

She saw Toothless. And he saw her.

Astrid felt her gut kick. She drew an involuntary breath. She glanced back to Fisk to make sure he hadn’t noticed her attention; he was just turning away from the cliff, all three baskets emptied. Alarmed, heart high in her throat, Astrid tried to send a quick, wide-eyed warning stare at Toothless only to find him gone.

“Ready to go?”

Jaw locked, heart racing, Astrid took the offered, empty basket and followed Fisk back into the forest. She kept her eyes active and upward, searching for a dragon in the trees.

He never reappeared, but she had seen him. She knew she had.
Astrid returned to the village with a new drive to visit that area again. She paid far closer attention on the walk back, noting any offbeat trees and landmarks, hoping to make a later argument in emptying baskets alone.

Her spirits were higher than they’d been in days. Toothless was alive. Toothless was here, on the island, with her. A cold weight she had been carrying lightened. She wasn’t alone. Not completely.

And damned if that dragon wasn’t smart. He was capable. He’d managed to remain undetected on a small island full of Vikings.

Terrified and exhilarated, Astrid dropped the baskets back at the fishing shack and took off again before Fisk could call her back. Sunset would be in an hour anyway.

She moved up the pathway quicker than she had all week. Her side tweaked and her legs burned, but she felt healthier. Some of her strength had returned.

Or maybe it was hope?

She arrived just as Ylva walked out with laundry, but even seeing the surly woman couldn’t completely crush Astrid’s spirits.

Ylva spotted Astrid a moment after closing the door.

“Good,” she said, brusque. “You can help me with these.”

Astrid’s eyes fell to the bundle.

She felt her legs leaden.

Red colored the furs, as bright as when she first found Hiccup tangled in Toothless’s limbs.

Furs from... from...

She breathed his name, a whisper that came too late to her own ears.

The world pitched. The optimism of earlier evaporated so quickly Astrid found herself unable to think. She tried to run into the chief’s home.

Ylva met her halfway down the steps and caught her arm with astounding strength beneath that fat.

“Hey!” the woman barked. “You are not to go in there!”

She gave Astrid’s arm a little shake.

“What happened?” Astrid yelled. She struggled, clawing for the door. The bundle of cloths and furs shifted under Ylva’s other arm. The stains seemed to have no end, reaching through the blankets to redden the woman’s stomach and sleeve.

“Never you mind!” Ylva snapped. “I said, you can help me with these. I expect it done now.”

“Hiccup!” Astrid called, vying for the door. “Hiccup!”

She was making a scene and she didn’t care. Her side ached from being rattled and the heavy expansion of her lungs and the rapid beating of her heart. The tendril of hope she’d been trying to
foster ended in a painful sizzle with the sight of Hiccup’s blood. *It was for nothing. Everything had been for nothing.*

*Setting his bones.*

Ylva gave her another good shake.

*Holding him through waves and heat.*

“Quiet now!”

“What did you *do* to him?” Astrid yanked her arm from Ylva’s so forcefully some of the furs tumbled to the ground.

Ylva snarled. “Ungrateful bitch!”

And, faster than Astrid had been prepared for, she was struck across the face with a blow that left her head splitting.

Shock stayed immediate retaliation. Then Astrid raised her fist to lash back, body still twisted, ready to use every momentum, every source of power, she had.

“What is going on here?”

The roar kept Astrid from following through.

Hackett stormed up the steep walkway. She’d never seen Hackett angry before. His wide forehead made for a great plain of veins, one in particular running between both brows and disappearing into his widow’s peak. His shoulders moved with his steps, forcing focus on his width and height.

His gaze was fierce and pinned on Astrid and Astrid alone.

Astrid felt her chest constrict.

Hackett didn’t stop until he was standing directly in front of both women, a step away, a shield against the village, trapping them between the door and himself.

Trapping Astrid. She tried not to hunch her shoulders. Tried not to touch the throb of her cheek. Her fist had dropped and she cradled it in her other hand as though to hide what she had intended. She still suffered an insatiable urge to knock Ylva on her heavy bottom.

Something inside her continued to burn with fury and her desperation to get to Hiccup did little to quench it.

Hackett’s glare, on the other hand, turned out to be more effective in helping Astrid let go of her unfulfilled outrage.

“You are a guest in my home,” Hacket hissed. Astrid felt her mouth go dry.

“I—I understand, but—”

“You will not speak to my wife like that.”

“She—”

“Are we clear?”
“Just tell me what happened to Hiccup!” Astrid burst out. “Let me see him!”

“Are we clear?”

Astrid could see why he was chief. Direct, decisive, powerful... She felt a childish sort of shame trouble her stomach.

“Yes,” she said quickly, staunchly refusing to look at Ylva, “but please, please—” She took a step closer. She could feel her throat spasm. She didn’t know what was wrong with her—why her nerves felt so frayed. The stained blanket left her rattled, unable to breathe. “Just—what happened? Tell me what happened. Please, chief.”

It might have been her use of title. Or maybe it was what Ylva had insinuated all along; that she was one of those girls who got what they wanted, but Hackett’s anger blunted. She saw his mouth shift, chewing the inside of his lip, and, without looking at his wife, nodded.

Astrid spun on her heel and pushed through the door, ignoring Ylva’s indignant call behind her.

She wasn’t alone inside the house. And neither was Hiccup.

Irpa looked up from the bedside, startled. Then guilty.

Time slowed as Astrid's legs took her to the bed.

The blankets had gone. Bloodied rags littered the floor. The mattress beneath Hiccup’s legs was stained dark brown.

She didn’t remember falling backwards; she felt a hard chest against her back and large hands settle on her shoulders. Motion returned to her. She sprung, again, stumbling over the discarded rags, both fury and sickness rising.

“What did you do?” The words sounded raw and quaking and Astrid had to take in a shuddering breath as soon as they left. She couldn’t breathe. The room felt hot and overbearing.

Irpa passed a wary eye over her and then returned to dabbing a mess of puckered, white skin with salve. “We were just changing the dressings. Got to keep them fresh. He was bleeding a bit. Unexpected, but we fixed that up…”

“When—” She was going to be sick. 

Shredded, crisped flesh. The blood on her hands. Her mother’s stew rushing up to meet her, caught in her throat.

“When did you—when—”

Gaps of flesh. Shattered bones crunching within an incomplete sack of skin. Shifting beneath her fingertips.

“We took the foot not long after we pulled you ashore,” said Hackett. He sounded close, but he didn’t try to touch her again. His voice had gone incredibly delicate; all traces of anger gone.

“’Ad to,” Irpa piped up. The shock of Astrid’s entrance seemed to have left her; she returned to wrapping the raw stump of Hiccup’s leg. “Nothing to be done with it. ’Was keeping him sick. Only chance for ’im, really.”

“You said to do what we could to save him,” Hackett reminded her. “And we did.”
They already **had**. Before she demanded it. Before she ever woke.

Hackett’s voice faded.

_Had he screamed during it? Had he stirred at all? Did they have to hold him down as they sawed through his leg?_

Astrid couldn’t look away. Fixated on the smeared mattress and the even, steady hands of Irpa. On the unnatural gap where Hiccup’s leg should have been. Hiccup had about a hand’s length of leg beneath his knee before they cut right through his shin bone.

She could hear Hackett speaking to her, even as Hiccup monopolized her attention.

“You’re a smart lass.”

_So pale. So fragile._

“You understand, don’t you?”

He looked like a corpse—a mutilated corpse—and a sense of failure mounted over Astrid like she’d never experienced before. Worse than when she lost in dragon training. That was a joke. How could she have ever despised at a game?

She didn’t feel anger at this failure. She felt despair. She felt contrite and remorseful and she **hated herself**. She hated herself more than she ever thought possible and she didn’t know how to make it better. She couldn’t. She had no control. She--

“Astrid?”

She blinked. Air flooded her lungs. The smell of fish sparked and Astrid realized she had a hand over her mouth.

“Yeah,” she croaked, and she forced herself to turn away from Hiccup’s dismembered body. The sickness remained. “Yeah. I’m…” she leaned against the wall, blinking strongly. “I’m okay.”

Vikings lost limbs all the time.

_So why did this feel so wrong?_

Was it the ill will of the people she felt simmering beneath their tolerance of her? The bad past between them and her village? The thin distrust carried in every conversation?

Maybe Hiccup would have had his foot removed no matter where he got treatment, Berk included.

She didn’t know. That was the problem. She would never know if it was a necessary measure or not, and it was too late to do anything about it.

The situation was out of her hands.

“Are you sure?” Hackett hovered over her. He seemed unsure if he should comfort or her step away and uncomfortable with either.

“I’m fine,” Astrid repeated, her voice hauntingly flat. Irpa flicked a look over her shoulder and then turned back to her steady aid.

“Alright,” said Hackett. His voice had gone softer. Or maybe he had stepped away…
“I just need a moment.” Astrid felt it rising: that thinly reigned hysteria.

She took a seat on the flat mat of hay she called a bed and watched Irpa refresh the bandages on Hiccup’s leg. Her hand came to cover her mouth again, her knees drawn to her chin, and she took comfort in the only outlet she had been allowed during her own recovery.

She cried.

Astrid left that night.

She checked Hiccup’s pulse, tiptoed across the floor, and slipped out the door with delicate steps. Her beeline to the forest had met no resistance beyond a few crunchy patches of earth and moments of tense waiting. She kept low, moved swift, and hardly blinked, forcing her eyes to drink in the waxing moon and distant braziers and every other source of light available.

The forest was nearly impossible to navigate at night. She entered where she had earlier with Fisk and tried to retrace her steps exactly. The trees were tall and, while their branches were thinning with approaching winter, they kept her from navigating by stars.

When she was far enough from the village, Astrid risked calling out.

“Toothless?”

He was smart. For a dragon. He must have understood her gesture or her expression back at the cliff. He might have tried to follow her back. He had seen her, after all. He could track her—better than she him.

“Toothless?”

A gnawing fear that he had been caught worked its way up her spine. Impossible, she insisted. He was a Night Fury.

Hiccup caught him.

Well, Hiccup was the only one in Viking history to do so, and that’s because he was different. There was no one different on this island. They were all like her.

Something cracked behind her. Astrid turned. Only trees with bark as black as the night stood in her limited vision.

“Toothless?” she whispered into the darkness. Silence pressed. Incredible silence. Not even a hoot... an insect's chirp...

Astrid set upon her path again—

—and screamed.

It sounded more like a shriek, something she choked back as quickly as it came. Blaring silence passed in its wake, where she stared at a pair of expressive green eyes striking out in the darkness.
The rest of his body came into focus—folded wings, triangular head, rounded, wobbling earplates.

Her heart calmed. No one came running. No one else heard her. No one would ever know she screamed. Because Toothless would never tell.

“You—,” she gasped, hand to her chest. “Don’t do that.”

Toothless made a noise like someone shaking thin metal, but organic and guttural. A laugh. A dragon laugh.

Deniably cute.

Toothless moved closer, quick and slinking, past her personal boundaries, and Astrid’s calming heart picked up once more. It might have been the stress of the past week. The brushes with death she hadn’t wanted to repeat. What she saw this afternoon—the blood, the severed leg, her powerlessness... But her new and tender understanding of dragons wasn’t ready to have Toothless press his face into her chest with a lolling tongue and a wagging tail.

“Don’t—” she began, ready to push him away, but Astrid instead found her hand settling on the dragon’s forehead, where his scales hummed with incredible warmth. She found comfort in the way he buried his nose in her gut and nuzzled against her with the heat of his breath warming her stomach. She hadn’t quite meant to slide her other arm over his jaw, or to welcome his over-enthusiasm so readily, but all too soon Astrid had a Night Fury in her embrace.

“I’m okay,” she murmured.

You aren’t alone, she reminded herself. Gods above, you have someone who gives a damn about you and it’s a dragon.

Toothless lifted his head, gave a soft bump on her chin, and stepped back. Astrid felt cold. She crossed her arms and addressed what she knew Toothless cared more about.

“I don’t know how Hiccup is. He’s...” Amputated. Unconscious. Dying. “He’s still alive,” she heard herself say. “He’s hanging in there and I’m helping in the village so that they’ll keep treating him. He might pull through.”

Her voice sounded thin. Could Toothless tell? Could Toothless understand anything she said?

He responded with a dry croon. She could barely make out the flap of an earfin, outlined in thin starlight. Only the eyes stood out to her.

“Are you okay?” Astrid asked. “Are you eating?”

Toothless made a new noise, higher.

“What? I—are you okay? Are you sick?”

Toothless nosed the ground, knocking leaves and sticks, towards Astrid and crooned. He didn’t sound sick. He sounded expectant.

He spun around, she could feel the whiffle of air as his tail swung by her shins. Then he smacked his lips, his tongue at his gums.

“Oh, yes, good news—all three of us are alive. You’re awfully positive, aren’t you?” She didn’t understand what he was saying. She wondered if Hiccup could have, had he been there.
Squinting, Astrid caught sight of Toothless’s uneven tailfin and immediately thought of Hiccup’s foot.

It was the same side. It was the side where Hiccup controlled the pedal. And now...

Astrid’s fist clenched.

*The looming tail, the frantic squeak of naked metal, the suspended sensation of waiting for the inevitable.*

*Her fingers hurt.*

*They tried to turn them away.*

*Her fingers hurt.*

That’s what Astrid would remember of that moment. How she gripped the fabric of Hiccup’s shirt so tightly that a dull ache spread through her knuckles and up her wrists. She had been waiting for death and all she could think about was her inability to loosen her hold and the mild pain it caused. She still felt it.

Astrid wished she could remember more of the fall, if only to help her out of this nightmare. Details that could save them. Details that would help her better figure their survival.

Yet, she would rather forget it altogether.

The pain in her hand also reminded Astrid that she had survived that. All three of them had. And they were still alive. Still fighting.

“We’re going to get off this island,” she said. She didn’t know how yet. Another boat, likely. A map was what she truly needed. She had a rough idea of where she was, but everything had been twisted speculation—foggy memories of old studies and tidbits she’d gotten out of Fisk.

Astrid now knew it was the Summer Current that shoved them so west. Even knowing which direction to take, back with the body of the Queen, back when she stood at the shore with the fading stars and her crappy raft, hadn’t helped her when she hadn’t known what land or waters she had been on.

Truthfully, Astrid needed Hiccup awake and able to fly Toothless, but that was not an option.

A branch snapped.

Astrid spun around, eyes wide. Toothless flicked his tail amidst the leaves and Astrid felt reassurance like a cool hand on the back of her neck. It came too high, the noise. A squirrel, most likely.

“I gotta get back,” she whispered. “They don’t like me wandering alone and someone might notice I’m gone.”

Toothless approached her again. This time Astrid welcomed the heavy, warm weight of his jaw and gave him an affectionate scratch. She felt the thick, scaled hide vibrate under her nails, pleased.

“Just… stay safe. And out of sight. I’ll come back when I get a chance.”
Tension in Hackett’s house had both risen and eased in the following weeks. Somewhere, Astrid’s hysteria had been understood and forgiven, but Ylva’s slap and Hackett taking side with his wife was a stark reminder that Astrid was an unwelcome guest.

Even more, her story of ‘not remembering’ was getting thin. Twice now, Hackett had brought it up. The trauma of seeing Hiccup’s leg had only bought her a day or so. Truly, Astrid hated that when she cried it worked. The tears had been real, and Astrid had never thought herself capable of being emotionally manipulative, but Ylva’s words of “that sort of girl” would spring up and strike her as potently as the backhand that had been delivered.

By a rare stroke of good fortune, Astrid managed to graduate to mucking stalls. Her time with Fisk had been split and she had been given a more active job. More of her strength returned and she could do minor heavy-lifting. She tried to pitch, again, her prowess as a warrior, but it had been shot down. She offered to help sharpen and care for blades, that she had experience with it, but Hackett didn’t want her near weapons; he never said as much but Astrid got the sense that he, and most others, did not want her armed.

She sympathized, if she were to see it from their perspective. It did little to quell her irritation.

When no one was around she’d do basic exercises to get her blood pumping again. She swore her ribs were nearly healed, even if Irpa disagreed. The skin on her side had faded to brown and yellow and her arms were now free of bandages. Scars ran their way up from knuckle to shoulder along with peeling skin that she’d continue to pick and scratch at until Irpa would catch her and slap her hands away.

Sometimes she suspected Irpa was doing Hackett a favor by insisting on Astrid’s poor health. It gave Hackett an excuse to keep her long hours with routine work.

She couldn’t get a complete read on the chief and the healer, or their relationship, but she suspected they might share a form of kinship. Hackett had a rustic sort of handsomeness to his face and Irpa lacked any whatsoever, but Astrid sensed familiarity between them. Something in their noses and their thoughtlessly easy interactions.

She managed to visit Toothless three more times in the following days. Once with her plan of carrying the fish gut baskets alone. The guts never made it to the cliff—Toothless had taken them as a treat—but her successful return had helped show she was strong enough to start carrying loads unaided.

The other two times had been at night. Last night, which had left her sluggish for the rest of the day, and the time before where she had run into someone patrolling the village. She made an excuse about an outhouse and they accepted it easily enough, but it shocked some fear back into her about stealth.

Astrid covered the last stretch of pathway and swallowed back the ill feeling she got whenever she approached the chief’s home unaccompanied. She never felt comfortable returning to the house alone lest Ylva be inside with something snide to say.

“Hello?” she called tentatively, pushing front the door open. The room was dim, the stairs to the left led to an even deeper darkness. Astrid had never been upstairs and had no intention of it; Ylva had told her to mind her place at the beginning of her stay and all it would take was one shriek of “snooping!” for Astrid to be relocated somewhere else, away from Hiccup.
Something simmered, unattended, at the hearth—a meat, most likely beef again as the overwintered herd thinned, that softened in broth. Astrid stepped fully inside and shut the door behind her, realizing a small source of light flickered on the eating table.

Ylva and Hacket must both be gone, which was rare. Astrid felt she wasn’t trusted in the house alone. Well, she knew it. She wasn’t trusted anywhere and it had long since worn thin on her patience. She ached for the comfort of Berk. For the welcome smiles and praises of Hooligans.

Astrid took a seat by Hiccup’s side, still reeking of dung.

“Hey,” she muttered. She glanced at the lower end of the bed, where the pile of covers gave the illusion that a full boy lie beneath. She knew better now. It still amazed her that she had spent nearly a week not knowing Hiccup was missing a leg. It felt… surreal. Impossible, even.

Pressure built over her eyelids. Her muscles demanded she stretch and have a lie down. The dark room beckoned her to rest. It wasn’t just the activities of the day that exhausted her—her sleep patterns had been disrupted.

Astrid had taken to napping during the day, even against her better judgement. Fisk once found her on a stool with her elbow dug in her knee, cheek pressed to palm, and a half-scaled fish at her feet. He wasn’t angry—he rarely showed anger towards her—but Astrid felt terrible nonetheless. She was tired, maybe from healing, maybe from the lies, and trying to find nights to sneak out to see Toothless hadn’t helped.

She rubbed her eye, hoping to press back the draw of sleep calling to her. Last night Toothless had been rambunctious. The dragon had an attitude that screamed independence, but he always treated her approach like a dog waiting for a friend. Wiggling and waiting, then breaking into her personal space without care to her own comfort.

He wanted news of Hiccup, but Astrid could only say the same thing every time: He’s still alive.

She had yet to mention the leg and she wasn't quite sure why.

“Can’t believe you’re still hanging in there,” Astrid admitted out loud. Using her voice helped to wake her a bit.

“I don’t know if you can hear me but…they took your leg.” The air seemed to prickle with the answering silence. She felt foolish. She felt foolish, helpless and lost as she had only felt in the past months and had never felt before then.

Her palm itched for a weapon. Her ribs felt better but her body continued to fall prey to weakness. Her emotions were out of her control. Every time she felt progress, some line of thought would drive her back.

Sometimes she’d stare at the smoke spiraling out of Grolli’s forge and imagine it came from Gobber’s. She’d close her eyes as she scaled fish and take in the sounds and smells and try to pretend she was back on Berk, at Hooligan Harbor. The ache in her chest would lessen, just a bit.

“IT’s the same as...the one you used for Toothless’s pedal. He’s okay, by the way.”

Astrid stopped and listened, wondering if someone was, in fact, in the house, holding their breath with an ear pressed to the floor, drinking in everything she said. She decided not to say anything more on Toothless.

“It would be really helpful if you woke up. I’m tired of doing this alone.”
Saying it out loud drove it home, as if it hadn't been before. She wanted a friend. She wanted someone at her side, someone she didn’t have to sneak away and find every few days. Loneliness brought the exhaustion back around...

The chair jolted. Pegs scraped against the floor. Astrid gasped and sat up. Her neck ached and her spine twinged. Her mouth felt especially dry. She saw furs, her arms, and Hiccup. She glanced around, quickly realizing, with a sinking heart, that someone towered over her.

Ylva stared unfavorably down. Since their semi-public confrontation there had been no efforts towards forced politeness.

“What?” Astrid murmured, brushing hair back from her face. She’d gotten used to the unevenness. No one had offered to cut it for her and Astrid didn’t care to see what she looked like.

Thankfully, Hackett was just a step behind his wife. The door jangled with a tied set of iron spoons as he closed it.

“Ah, hope you ladies are behaving.” It was odd to hear Hackett nervous.

Ylva replied, “Found her sleeping on the boy.”

Astrid jumped to her feet, nearly toppling the chair. Anger powered her legs and shook the last residual drowsiness from her head.

“I wasn’t on—I—just nodded off, is all!”

Hackett gave her a slow nod, “Fair enough.” Then he smiled. "Who’s hungry? Smells delicious, Ylva.”

Ylva kept her temper and stepped back.

"Have a seat, lass,” Hackett offered, taking the only high-backed chair at the table, the curved sigil of the Reef Warriors carved at its crown and painted blue. Astrid didn't look at Hiccup, or at Ylva, when she took up the offer and sat at the side bench, where a cup of weak ale waited for her.

Hackett gave her a warm grin and ripped her a chunk of leavened bread. Astrid returned the expression and, in doing so, felt some energy return. She sensed that Hackett at least acknowledged Ylva's bearing, and though he would always put his wife first, would also offer Astrid small apologetic gestures in the woman's stead. It helped.

She took a small bite as her cheeks cooled and tasted the sweetness of honey. Under any other circumstances she would have complimented Ylva for her gift.

Ylva returned with a large bowl of stew and set it before Hackett, followed by a moderate one for herself, and finally Astrid's, which she set down gently before her. No amount of distaste for Astrid would drive the woman to take it out on her own property.

“Delicious,” Hackett complimented his wife.

Ylva smiled back. A smile that dropped as her eyes passed over Astrid.

“So Astrid,” Hackett began. “You disappeared on us last night.”

Astrid paused with the spoon in her mouth. She pulled it out with deliberate slowness and tried to keep her body from betraying her panic. Her mind decided to panic for her, a thousand thoughts so
weighted in jeopardy none could rise above the rest.

*What did he know? Gods, he knew, didn’t he? Shit. Shit. What would he do?*

Words left Astrid's mouth before she knew what she could possibly say.

“I… couldn’t sleep.” Hackett continued to watch her. He didn’t seem particularly angry or alarmed. Slowly, Astrid allowed the assumption that he knew nothing of Toothless to take hold. It helped clear her head. "It’s hard, around him.” She pointed at Hiccup with her spoon. “Just knowing…” *that he was mutilated without any warning or consent.* She wouldn’t play that card. She knew why they did it. It was her own fault for having trouble swallowing it. “Sometimes I go for walks to clear my head. I used to do it—”

She stopped. Hackett leaned forward, over his bowl.

“Do you remember your home?”

Ylva softened a chunk of bread into her bowl and watched Astrid with dark, heavy-lidded eyes.

“Er… no.” Astrid said, rather lamely. She kept her attention on her bowl. “But it feels familiar. And… right. So I must have, yeah?”

She met his stare with an element of defiance she rarely would display towards someone her senior. She wasn’t sure when she stopped caring about decorum and respect, but fear played a heavy part in stamping it out.

Hackett sat back in his chair, grabbing his mug and swilling the drink within. “Well, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t wander too far.”

The tension hadn’t quite released from her shoulders, but Astrid managed to shrug and bobbed her head. “Alright.”

She continued forced calm over herself, taking another mouthful of seasoned stew, even as her mind continued to race. Did that mean don’t wander *at all*? Would she get in trouble if she went out again at all?

She’d have to hold off on visiting Toothless for a while.

---

“Wow, are you sure you’re eating?”

The opportunity for Astrid to see Toothless again came three days later. Fisk and four other members of his family—each as tall as Fisk—had an early morning haul that came with the scheduled migration of fish.

Astrid volunteered to empty the gut baskets. The dock seemed more crowded than ever with people trading for fish by the handful. A pile of linens, coin, and baskets of crop grew under the shade of the dock hut.

“You have so much to do here,” she had said to Fisk. She smiled at him, hating herself for *knowing* it would help her case. Fisks’ uncharacteristic reluctance concerned her, and her worry that Hackett might have told Fisk to keep an eye on her came to fruition when Fisk conceded using
the same words Hackett had before:

“Don’t wander too far.”

It took all of Astrid’s willpower not to sneer. How far could she possibly wander? Reef Island was a quarter the size of Berk. It was more a warning to stay the course and return right away. They both knew it.

Maybe she was overly paranoid or maybe her smile had worked. What mattered was that Fisk let her.

Now she had a few moments in the depths of the forest and in the presence of a Night Fury with an insatiable appetite. She had yet to make it to the cliffs since the first time she walked the trail, but so long as she returned with empty baskets no one had to know.

Maybe Toothless wasn’t eating, Astrid mused, feeling worried for the dragon. He had his head in one of the empty baskets and licked around its corners as though trying to reach every sliver of fish he could get his tongue on. Only seeing the southern docks and the eastern crags, Astrid didn’t know if the island had any access to the sea, or what other options for food Toothless had. Squirrels? Birds?

Surely, he didn’t eat nuts or berries...

“Good?” Astrid asked when his head finally emerged from the basket.

Toothless nodded—a vigorous and frighteningly human gesture. He wiggled, smirked his lips, and approached. Astrid received him without so much as a flinch. Last time, she figured out where to scratch that made the tiny earplates at the top of his head vibrate and now enjoyed the accompanying hum that shook from his throat.

“Oh, Toothless, I can’t come out here much. Not at night. I was seen—well, they noticed me leaving. That’s not good. That’s why I... why it’s been a while. They’re already suspicious of me. They don’t like me here.”

Toothless wumped, like an annoyed moan. Astrid’s eyebrow rose.

“I get it. I do. I wouldn’t either in the circumstances. It’s just…”

‘Hard.

Toothless bumped his nose to her chin. Hot, fishy breath[6] washed over her face.

Astrid coughed, laughed, and rested a hand on Toothless’ head. He had a charm, she supposed. It was nice to have someone around that was on her team, at least.

“I don’t want to risk bringing people to you. You understand that, right? Yeah, Toothless?”

She wanted another nod. She knew he could do it.

Toothless cocked his head. One earplate seemed to stretch upward and wiggle towards the treetops. Astrid didn’t know what that meant in Dragon.

“But if anything happens to Hiccup, I’ll definitely let you—”

Toothless tensed. He looked up and then bounded away. Leaves scattered.
Astrid’s bewilderment ended with the same breath, shifting into warning. She spun on the ball of her foot, knees bent, and reached behind her as though she had a knife. Habit.

A pair of birds flittered overhead. Streams of sun highlighted mossy rocks and brought out the reddish undertone of the tall, sable trees. She could see particles, otherwise invisible, dancing in the light, making the long, slow jump from the highest branches.

Nothing happened.

Then she heard it. Crunching. A steady, heavy foot. Human.

Astrid quickly grabbed the baskets scattered around the area of Toothless’ enthusiasm, kicking needles and leaves over the most disturbed patches of earth. She had one thrown over her shoulder by the strap and the other two under her arms and started walking back just as Fisk appeared through the trees.

“There you are!”

Astrid wet her lips and steadied her breath, clinging to the belief that he just arrived.

“Was I… late or something?”

“No,” he said, rather quickly. Astrid narrowed her eyes.

“Were you... following me?”

“No,” Fisk said again, defensive.

Astrid considered him, suspicion thickening her features. Fisk lowered his head and stuck his lip out mulishly. Perhaps caught in a lie. Perhaps annoyed by her accusation. It made his jaw look even larger.

“I was sent to find you,” he explained. "Your friend’s awake.”

Chapter End Notes

Jenna-sais-pas is amazing and did the editing for this. Thank you so much!
Koma

Chapter Summary

Hiccup's awake and Hackett wants Astrid to make a decision

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Jenna-Sais-Pas for being an amazing beta!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Koma I

Astrid stepped into the cheerless room. She saw Hackett, with his thick arms crossed and a frown. Ylva folding cloths and muttering something to her husband. Irpa with a hand pressed against Hiccup's forehead, his cheek, his neck…


He looked wane and weak—Astrid found herself shocked that such a picture didn't naturally align with what she remembered of him. Hiccup had always been weedy but strong, like a spry, young spur. Now he looked brittle and troubled and pale enough to disappear into the flaxen pillow at his back. His hair fell limp against his forehead from a month of sweats and his cheeks were drawn and hollow.

"Hiccup!"

He appeared startled by her, like an awakening corpse with eyes made wider by the underlining shadows.

"Astrid?" he croaked. He stared at her like he was going mad.

She swept toward him. Ylva blurred, Irpa blurred, she completely forgot where Hackett stood and she didn't care. Astrid hardly noticed Irpa jumping away from the bedside seat or how she took it without so much as a thank you. She fell heavily against the wood, mindless to the jolt in her bones, and took a moment to stare at Hiccup and marvel.

She could have cried. He was alive. He was alive and sitting up and looking awful but alive.

The impulse to touch him, hug him, overtook her arms, which twitched and lifted and hovered a moment between them, but then dropped, as though suddenly becoming aware of how many people were in the room. Or how odd it might look. How odd it would feel.

She was too grateful to feel embarrassed.
Odin's beard, how? When?

"You're... a—" the whispered alive got caught halfway out her mouth. Astrid gripped the edge of the bed. An all too familiar heat swam at the corners of her eyes. Her face felt inordinately warm and she had to press her lips together to keep from grinning like an idiot. An incomprehensible bubble of relief she hadn't known she carried swelled and lifted and nearly choked her.

Hiccup managed a hint of a smile. It didn't come close to his eyes, but he seemed to carry his own marvel towards her and how she was sitting next to him in the home of strangers.

His eyes flicked up and then back to Astrid. He opened his mouth and in that split second a bleak reality that anything he said could get them killed deflated Astrid's euphoric moment.

"Where's—"

"We're the only survivors. I think." She wasn't sure what she was trying to imply with the quickly spit words but the growing alarm didn't surprise her. She hurried to continue. "The ship, do you remember?"

Astrid hoped she hadn't said it too loudly or so obviously telling. She hoped he hadn't already said something that debunked her entire weakly spun tale or that Hackett was merely allowing her a courtesy.

She strained her eyes as hard as she could without causing suspicion. Hiccup met her stare. Ipra coughed. Ylva shook out a mantle.

Then he blinked.

"Ah... yeah," he said, lame. "I..." He closed his eyes and Astrid felt a panic that he'd want to go back to sleep. Of course he'd want that, but she wasn't ready for him to. She needed him here with her. She just got him back and she wasn't ready to be alone again.

"Attacked," Astrid supplied.

He swallowed with some difficulty. He breathed, "By those..."

"Vikings," she said just as quickly.

Hiccup seemed to teeter, eyes on his lap. Astrid reached out and held his shoulder. His skin burned through his tunic; it was more than the chill her fingers brought from outside. He was feverish. And bony.

"Hiccup?"

The others were watching, listening. Astrid felt the heat of their presence as well as the heat of Hiccup's fever.

"I'm okay," he murmured. He braced a hand on the bed and opened his eyes. He looked at her and suddenly the last of Astrid's joy faltered. He was in pain. He was in every sort of pain she'd known.

"Were there... survivors?" he asked.

What?

He stared at her, staunchly ignoring the other occupants of the house, and suddenly Astrid understood.
"Um…" How could she say this? She couldn't look behind her. "I think… one of those—those… toothless old-timers might have survived… They're hard to kill."

The heaviness hadn't lifted from Hiccup's face but he seemed to understand.

Astrid wet her lips, unable to help her eyes from sliding to the depression in the furs.

"Hiccup…" Her voice sounded unendingly delicate to her own ears, but he seemed so fragile. Unnaturally fragile. "They—"

"I know," he said, quietly. His hand tightened over the cuff of the blanket in his lap but he didn't draw it back. He said nothing. She could see the rise and fall of his back through the thin tunic. It fell lower down his chest than her own had, showing off pale, freckled ribs made more concave with the hunch to his spine.

"Do you—" Astrid wet her lips again. What could she say to him? Sorry for your loss?

The silence was too thick. Too awkward. She couldn't do this anymore. The tiptoeing and the careful words and the watching.

To hel with it.

She turned to the three adults. "Can we have a moment alone?"

"I'm not done with him," Irpa immediately responded with an arched brow.

"I think Hiccup needs to process what happened," Astrid countered.

She didn't know if Hiccup already played the part, but he remained hunched and staring and quiet and unresponsive to people blatantly talking about him. His eyes kept falling to his leg before darting away and returning, like he couldn't help it.

Astrid turned a pleading look to the chief, who nodded.

"Sure," Hacket said. He put an arm around a frowning Ylva and moved her to the entryway, where a discussion in fervent whispers erupted. Irpa followed after.

As soon as all three were far enough away, Astrid turned back to Hiccup and hissed, "Toothless is alive."

His eyes gained focus; a spark of life returned.

"His tail is wrecked," she continued, quickly, "The fake one."

"But he's alive," Hiccup whispered, breathless.

"Yes. And here. I—" she glanced back. The three adults were engrossed in their own whispered conversation. She could worry about that later. "I've seen him a couple times. He's okay."

"He is?"

Astrid felt something indescribable with the small smile in his voice and the pain that continued to plague his features. It was the most pitiable combination she'd ever seen.

She smiled. "We've been waiting for you."
Astrid put a hand back on Hiccup's shoulder. The bone struck out at her more than the heat. He was much too thin.

She leaned forward and turned her head to catch his attention, which continued to waver to his lap, to his leg.

"Hiccup," she whispered, imploring. "She's dead. The queen."

He looked at her, the bags under his eyes making him appear skeletal.

"She's…"

Astrid smiled wider, an out-of-place giddiness tightening in her stomach. "You did it. I think the war is over!"

The corner of his lip lifted, then his eyes lost focus and lowered, twitching, unseeing, at his lap. His mouth opened, moving with silent words. She felt his skin shudder beneath her palm.

Hiccup lurched forward with a short cry and gripped his left thigh.

"Hiccup!" Astrid cried.

Irpa hustled back, her frizzled white hair making her seem hectic.

"I'm okay," Hiccup said in a thin, shaky gasp. "I just… I was remembering."

"Where you're from?"

Hackett had returned as well. Astrid didn't see Ylva and she couldn't bring herself to care because she was too busy kicking herself.

Freya above, she hadn't warned Hiccup. She spent their brief respite comforting him—stupidly, inexplicably—and not preparing him. Not telling him they were on an enemy island or any of her cover story or to keep his mouth shut.

Hackett's shadow fell over her like a cold pall.

The impulse to snap at him that now wasn't the time seized her. Panic spurred her to do just that.

Astrid took a breath—

Hiccup mumbled, "Murdano."

She turned and stared.

Murdano? Murdano was a tiny, useless island.

Hackett appeared equally bewildered. "Off of Swallows?"

Hiccup nodded. "It wasn't all of us… we were Danger Brute prisoners."

His arms went around his shoulders and he somehow seemed smaller.

Astrid sat back, bemused. Hiccup continued to look unstable, which did nothing in helping her figure out his game.

"Do you remember any of this?" Hackett asked her.
"Yeah…?" It sounded too much like a question.

Crap.

"The village, yes," Astrid said quickly. "That sounds right. I'm having trouble remembering the Danger Brutes but… it'll come to me. Thanks Hiccup."

He nodded once.

"Ready to try walking?" Irpa asked.

Hiccup's head shot up. He looked panicked.

"I—maybe." He shifted his weight under him a little more as though testing what he was capable of. Astrid saw him wince.

Irpa tisked without much remorse. "Gotta get you moving a bit or you'll get sores. You've been down long enough."

Astrid, though thankful for the distraction, wanted to shout at the crazy, splintery woman. Couldn’t she see Hiccup was traumatized enough?

But Hiccup pulled back the covers, exposing the leg and a half. Astrid said nothing as he spent a moment staring at the empty spot. Then he closed his eyes, took a breath, and shifted his legs over the side of the bed.

Astrid felt herself being shoved off the chair. Irpa hadn't said anything to her; no "move" or "budge up". She just pushed. Astrid sprung away before she tumbled to the floor. Her concern for Hiccup overpowered her irritation.

Irpa took her place with a simple wooden prosthesis topped by a cup that would neatly pack in Hiccup's stump.

"Can you move your leg a bit for me?" she asked.

Hiccup bent and straightened his knee. With the pant leg bunched around his thigh Astrid could watch the bandaged stump move back and forth, knobby kneecap seeming to pop with the motion. His leg was as pallid as the rest of his skin, the only color coming from the fair, orange hair starting just below the knee.

"How's it feel?" Irpa asked.

"Like it's gone." Hiccup sounded ungracious and no one could fault him. Astrid couldn't seem to look away, even when she felt Hiccup deserved less of an audience for that moment of weakness. She never would have been able to handle it. Ylva, at least, seemed to keep herself busy upstairs with footfalls that paced overhead.

Hackett watched with crossed arms.

Irpa nodded. "Fair does. Bear with me."

Irpa then gently—or as gently as her claw-like fingers could—cupped the back of Hiccup's wasted calf, angled the cup to the bandages, and shoved the prosthesis on him.

Hiccup inhaled sharply. His fingers curled into the cloth at either side of his hips.
Astrid grit her teeth. Her own leg ached from watching. She shifted her weight to the left, relishing in the pressure. She wished she could have extended the comfort to Hiccup.

"Good?" Irpa asked.

Hiccup didn't respond. His lips were pursed, his cheek jumped. He appeared to lose even more color. Astrid waited until his death grip on the bed lessened to step forward and hold out a hand. Hiccup glanced at it and looked down again. Her offer hung between them.

He might refuse and she could, in a way, understand why. Pride might have kept her from accepting help after being weakened for so long, but she'd never known Hiccup to refuse help before.

Nor ask for it, admittedly.

After another breath, blown through his teeth as though he were preparing to take a long plunge, he took her hand. His fingers were freezing, nails a bit long and brittle.

Hiccup pushed off. He wasn't heavy as he used her to anchor himself into standing; all of his weight went to his shaking, right leg. The vibrations ran through their linked hands. He tentatively lifted his newly fixed peg leg and tapped the tapered wood to the ground. He swayed in his struggle to balance, even with his feeble grip on Astrid.

Astrid realized he must be dizzy and weak. She reached to steady him with her free hand.

"I got it," Hiccup muttered before she could touch his shoulder.

He gripped the clothing at his side and Astrid imagined that his pants nearly slipped off as he stood. He wasn't wearing a belt or cord of any kind and they were probably designed for someone with an actual waist to begin with.

"Want to take a step?" she asked.

She saw him swallow; she could see every bone and muscle in his neck. The hollow dent at the base of his throat pulse upward. She felt a sudden urge to feed him.

Rather than take a step, he moved all his weight onto his left leg—a muscle in his cheek jumping—then back to his right. Testing, good.

Hiccup brought the peg forward and he pressed onto it. His right foot came next to it in a quick, short movement.

Hiccup tried to take another step. His knee buckled and he pitched forward.

Astrid stepped in front of him before he hit the ground. He crashed into her chest. She let go of his hand and her arms went around him, helping to get the weight off his left leg as best she could.

Thank the gods she had healed, even if Hiccup might have been as light as a lamb.

"S-sorry," Hiccup muttered, quickly pushing back to an arms-length. He seemed furious with himself.

"I'll have Jord fashion you a crutch," Hackett said.

Astrid had nearly forgotten the other people in the room. Hiccup hadn't. He kept his eyes down, nostrils flaring through pained breath.
She had been right; he hated the audience.

"I don't think we have any that'll work for your size," Hackett went on. "It might be a day or two before we get you something—"

The stairs creaked as Ylva descended. She emerged around their corner with a wicker full of beets. Upon seeing Hiccup, she handed the basket off to her husband and let out a pleased, "Standing already?"

"That's a kind way of putting it," Hiccup said with a shaky laugh. It nearly threw him backwards and Astrid reclaimed his hand.

"Welp, you can walk well enough," Irpa piped up. She bent to gather some of the herbs and stuff them back into her satchel, missing Hiccup and Astrid's incredulity.

"I…" Hiccup started.

"You feeling up for a wash, dear?" Ylva asked. And before Astrid could make any sort of derisive noise for the term of endearment, she added, "Your girl can help."

"Yeah—I-I can do it," Hiccup said quickly, snatching his hand from Astrid's. His face colored spectacularly after such a pale pallet. "It's fine." He assured Astrid, and only then did she realize how intently she stared at him.

"Hiccup, if you need help…" she began to offer, but nothing about the prospect appealed to her either.

"I'll do it," Irpa cut in, before adding to Astrid, "You're useless."

Her mouth dropped. "I—"

"Thanks," Hiccup said quickly.

Astrid stood her ground. "I'll help him get there and you can help him bathe. I'm not useless."

Irpa rolled her eyes. Astrid caught sight of Hackett sending an odd smile down at the turnip he skinned, thumb and knife rounding the vegetable. Ylva worked at his left, chopping everything he prepared. It was the first time Astrid noticed she stood half a head shorter than him—she'd always seemed so tall.

Ylva leaned back so that her bundle of tied curls bounced in the air.

"I'll have something for you to eat when you get back," she said to Hiccup.

Astrid hadn't heard her speak so kindly to anyone other than her husband. She stared at the broad back, feeling like she'd never met the woman.

"Thanks," Hiccup said gratefully.

Astrid needed to get out.

"Come on," she muttered, taking Hiccup's left arm over her shoulder. She wrinkled her nose a bit at the smell but acted as Hiccup's crutch as they slowly moved towards the door.

"Alright?" she asked, maneuvering so she could get the door open.
"Yeah."

Light washed over them as they exited.

"Reef Warriors." Astrid muttered as soon as they got outside, fully aware that Irpa followed them.

Hiccup paused at the step, blinking around with the sun glaring directly against his right cheek as it set. He gave a nearly imperceivable nod and a subtle jostle to keep moving.

Irpa remained a step behind as they climbed up the slight incline. Astrid half-carried Hiccup for much of the uphill path. He whispered apologies between grunts and gasps and she assured him, again and again, that it was fine. She went so far as to bring Hiccup straight into the chief's bath. It was steaming, freshly heated. She felt a tiny sprig of indignation but smothered it immediately. Hiccup lost a leg; he'd get a hot bath.

"You good?" Astrid asked when she set Hiccup to lean against the edge of the tub.

"Yeah," he said, thin chest heaving, left leg lifted from the ground. "Thanks."

He held her gaze. Astrid saw that getting up and moving had given a little more life to him; his cheeks had color and his eyes were clear. Astrid’s gratitude at seeing him alive returned, and the odd impulse to hug him, again, struck her. She swallowed and patted his shoulder instead.

"I'm glad you're alive."

He gave a tight smile.

"Me too."

"Let's get this over with," Irpa rattled, breaking the privacy.

Astrid left, making sure to shut the door behind her.

An indignant "I can undress myself!" followed her down the hill.

"Astrid?"

"Yeah?"

"… You awake?"

"Hiccup. Really?"

A loud snort cut through the darkness before falling back into the rhythmic snores that rained through the floor every night. Astrid still hadn't figured if it were Hackett or Ylva.

Hiccup didn't snore, which hadn't surprised Astrid much. He was a very still sleeper—or perhaps it was his condition that made him so. She'd welcome some more activity on his part in any form.

She was surprised Hiccup was awake at all. He fell asleep soon after he ate after the bath, which
made sense, given how much his body still had to heal. Even then, he barely ate anything at all. Normally she'd be famished after getting nothing but broths; Hiccup picked at his food and chewed slowly. He looked better after being cleaned and fed, but still far too thin.

"Sorry," he muttered.

Astrid rolled over on her hay. "What's up?"

She saw his head shift, probably looking at her, peering through the darkness as she did towards him.

"Do you want the bed?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Hiccup, I'm sure. You—" she nearly mentioned his leg, "need it more than me."

He snorted. "My leg doesn't care about a mattress."

Okay, so she might as well have.

"How," she hesitated, wetting her lips. "How are you?"

For a moment, Hiccup didn't move. Then she saw his silhouette grow and deflate. She heard the loud sigh.

"Okay. Still… Still haven't really… really processed it, you know? I can't…" He shifted again and Astrid saw him turn away, moving onto his back, the profile of his nose highlighted by the slivers of moonlight filtered through the door.

"I keep thinking about that last flight and how I worked the pedal. Exactly what I had to do when we dove and trying to avoid that tail. My leg keeps… twitching, like it's trying to move the tailfin. It's broken. It was broken, I mean."

Astrid listened to him speak. She could picture it all, even with his short unclear sentences. She remembered the sound of piping hinges and Hiccup glancing back before she thought to see what the matter was. She remembered his profile and the fear in his eyes and she knew, even before she saw the skeletal, useless remains of the tailfin, that they lost control. She was still looking back at it, hearing it squeaking, flapping uselessly, when the tail struck.

"It's like my leg doesn't know we lost," Hiccup uttered. Astrid fought the impulse to disagree—to say they didn't, that they won—and listened. "It… I swear I can feel it. And then I look at it and I don't see it and... and it's like my brain can't accept it."

"It will," Astrid said softly, uncomfortably, speaking of things she knew she couldn't understand. "You'll be able to do everything you used to, Hiccup. Look at Gobber. Bucket. There are countless Vikings that lose limbs."

"I know," he said, shortly. Astrid didn't rise to his tone.

He inhaled. She could hear him swallow. The snoring above continued.

When Hiccup next spoke, his voice sounded hoarse.

"Thank you."
Astrid pulled the blanket up around her chin, suddenly chilled. "Don't. You might have kept your foot if I knew anything."

"No," Hiccup sighed, again. She heard the pillow rustle as he turned his neck towards her. "I remember the tail clubbing us. Sort of. I saw it coming. But the pedal for the tail? …It ripped my foot apart. I know it."

Astrid wouldn't argue with him over it. Not now. She found her lips dry and sticking when she moved to speak again. "When you get better at walking, I'll take you to see Toothless."

Astrid didn't know how, because she sure as Hel couldn't see it, but somehow she could feel Hiccup's smile in the darkness. She could picture it in her head—wide, lopsided, and doofy.

"How long was I out?" he asked.

"About a month. I woke up a day or two after. I just had burns mostly. And broken ribs. I was fine. You were… well. A month, like I said."

"A month…" She heard the wonder in his voice, like he couldn't believe it himself.

"You might have woken up a few times, but you were so feverish they kept you down with medicine. It was probably for the best." She remembered checking Hiccup's pulse daily. Every chance she got. Always waiting for the day it would stop, not just because he succumbed to fever, but because the poppy was a little too strong. Or because they slipped something into his broths… belladonna…

He snorted. "Still felt like Hel when I woke up."

"I honestly thought you were going to die."

A beat passed. "I'm not going to die."

"Something could still happen. An infection—"

"No," he said with that familiar hint of wry. "If there was ever a time for me to die, that was it. Too late now. Missed opportunity."

"It's not funny, Hiccup." She might have smiled anyway—she couldn't tell herself, as her voice certainly didn't betray it—but he didn't have to know that.

"I guess not," he conceded. She heard no apology in his voice. "So, how much trouble are we in? I mean the both of us. Here."

Astrid finally started to feel the draw of sleep, but this was a conversation that needed to be had and there was no better time under the cover of night and someone's snores above. She took a moment to strain her ears, just to ensure no one had snuck down.

"Reef Warrior Island is small," she began. "Toothless has stayed hidden so far but we always run the risk of him being discovered." She bit her lip and thought about her treatment over the past month. "So far we haven't officially declared ourselves as an enemy but… they're suspicious. They've been… not friendly, exactly. Not mean, but…” she ignored Ylva hitting her, "… distrustful, I guess." A shock of energy knocked away the creeping sleep and she lifted herself onto her elbows. "Did you say anything? Before I got here? Anything about B—uh—about where we're from?"
"I think I asked for my dad but… I just said dad. I think. I'm pretty sure." His voice grew quiet. It wasn't encouraging.

Astrid settled back against the hay.

"How'd you know, anyway?" Hiccup asked. "That they weren't friendly? I mean… did you say anything."

"No." She hoped. "There's a shield with a Reef Warrior insignia on it just above your head. I saw it before I said too much."

"Smart."

She liked this, twenty questions. Astrid never thought she'd crave the sound of Hiccup's voice, but every time he spoke she felt a little warmer, the unacknowledged loneliness melting away.

"Why the Swallows?" she countered.

"They're pretty neutral, right?" He nearly sounded unsure himself, a stark contrast to hours earlier where he muttered everything with just the right about of certainty and just the right amount of hesitance. "I wasn't sure who we were stuck with but you made it obvious enough that you hadn't told them we were from Berk so…"

A whisper of a smile overtook her face. Astrid nearly forgot how clever Hiccup could be. Quick witted, at least. They might survive this yet.

"I was kind of impressed," she granted.

"Plus you looked absolutely panicked."

Her smile faded. "I… no I didn't."

She specifically remembered trying to hide her panic. Had Hackett sensed panic from her? Had she raised his suspicions?

"You were giving me crazy eyes."

Astrid scowled at him despite knowing he couldn't see it. "They weren't crazy."

She forgot how annoying Hiccup could be too.

She stared at the ceiling and focused on the snoring; the assurance that they weren't being listened to.

"We need to start thinking of how to get out of here," she murmured.

"Well, we're not in a good position. Friend-of-our-Enemy is not ours. North is the Murderous Tribe. South is the Lava Louts. We really gotta head east, the question is how."

Unless they wanted to go to the Americas. Find some mythical potatoes.

Astrid found herself nodding.

"How do you know all this?"

She didn't know why it surprised her that Hiccup spouted off geography, only that it seemed more like something Fishlegs would do. She hadn't talked to Hiccup all that much in the past few years.
"Astrid," Hiccup sighed. "I've had this stuff drilled into my head since I could read."

"I know. I forget sometimes—" She stopped herself from finishing and grimaced at her lack of tact.

It was too late, and she heard Hiccup's voice as it flattened, contemptuous: "Yeah, Snotlout is who everyone thinks of when it comes to the next chief."

She couldn't deny it.

"I don't think Snotlout has blood feuds and geography memorized," she granted. In fact, Snotlout probably would have blown their cover in the first moments upon waking. He would have fought her for command of the situation, or leaned on her too heavily. Hiccup, so far, though it had only been a day, had been quick to read the situation and quick to take on some of the burden.

Hiccup made a non-committal noise and shifted around in his blanket.

"Just… focus on recovering," Astrid whispered into the dark. "And we'll keep pretending we're shipwrecked Murdanos."

"And escapee captives of Danger Brutes."

"One of those barbaric southern clans, yes. And once you're well enough, we'll head east."

"Hopefully flying."

"Hopefully."

But she couldn't see it happening. Not with Toothless' tail and not under the mistrustful scrutiny of the Reef Warriors.

"Astrid?"

"Yeah?"

"How did you get us away from the Queen?"

"… Another time, Hiccup."

Astrid stepped into the chief's house without a knock. She felt chilled. The weather was getting cooler but she hadn't yet been offered anything more to wear by Ylva.

She heard voices as she entered.

"…ever had it explained to be honest. I just knew which one to use."

"Well it's the finer grit you want," Hiccup explained. He was on his feet, leaning heavily on a new crutch. Ylva sat at the edge of the table with a longsword across her lap. She had a dark whetting stone in her hand, experimentally running it along the blade's lip.

"Especially for something that's not so dull," Hiccup went on. "They're better for maintenance—"
Ylva looked up before Hiccup finished speaking. Whatever expression she wore for Hiccup fell as soon as she set eyes on Astrid. Hiccup, on the other hand, brightened upon following her gaze.

Astrid raised the damp bag she held lightly. "I brought some fish from Fisk."

"Set it there," said Ylva, gesturing to the empty table save for a medley of plucked herbs, some dry, others still moist with earth. She stood, rather abruptly, from the table, the weapon she'd been stoning tight in hand, and stepped upstairs.

Astrid waited in the entryway for her to pass.

Then she scurried over to Hiccup.

"Hey," she greeted. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine," he said. He did look better, even if it had only been a day since he woke. The bath had done wonders; his hair no longer fell limp, though he hadn’t seemed to clean up the peach fuzz clinging to his chin and lip. He smelled a world better as well.

He'd even managed to procure a cord to help keep his clothes up.

Astrid hadn't seen him since the night before, having been whisked away for chores almost as soon as she'd woken. Hiccup was still sleeping, and for a moment Astrid had nearly forgotten that he had woken at all, so used to the sight of him static and comatose. But even that morning, Hiccup had more color, something alive about him, with clean hair that fell lightly around his pillow and a distinct lack of hovering death. He had an element of peace about his sleep.

"What did you do all day?" he asked, lowering himself onto his bed.

"Everything," she said, dropping the odorous bag on the table. "Spent most of it on the wharf with Fisk—the fish guy." She took a seat next to him.

"Is he nice? Are they nice to you?"

Astrid leaned an elbow on her knee and leveled a bemused stare at Hiccup. She wouldn't admit that sometimes Fisk was too nice and it bothered her.

"The people are fine. They leave me alone for the most part."

"If you consider that fine."

She ignored his muttered comment and asked, "Have you been outside?"

He nodded. "A couple times. I've been…" he rocked, grinding the new crutch into the floor, "practicing."

"How's it… feeling." She didn't know why she faltered halfway through asking. Something about the topic felt sensitive.

"Just… you know."

She didn't know. He didn't say good, which they both would have known to be a lie. The honesty might have been a good or bad sign.

Hiccup rubbed a hand over the curve of his knee. His fingertips ran along the excess fabric of his trousers, everything that didn't get bundled into the prosthetic as padding. "I guess… I guess it's—"
The stairs moaned with the weight of Ylva returning. Astrid felt a knob of guilt strike her chest, a sense of displacement, and hated it—the physical response.

A dark head of hair turned at the base of the steps. The rest of Ylva's broad body followed, her eyes passing over the pair of teens, and, with hands wiping down the lap of her apron, she returned to the neatly chopped pile thyme partitioned to a clean corner of the table.

"I don't expect Hackett back yet," Ylva informed them, reaching to a shelf higher than Astrid could ever reach and pulling a clay jar. She glanced directly at Hiccup and said, "Why don't you head outside for a bit? Get some air."

Astrid scowled. Ylva had been fine with Hiccup in the house before she arrived. Couldn't she see Hiccup was tired?

"I can—"

"Sounds good," Hiccup said before Astrid could argue otherwise.

"Hiccup."

He gripped both hands around his crutch and used it to levy himself off the bed with a soft grunt.

"Hiccup, you don't have to—"

"I want to," he insisted. He hobbled towards the door, nodding at Ylva as he passed. "I've been cooped up too long. I've slept twice since you left."

"Well, you're healing," Astrid responded and she made sure to catch Ylva's eye as she followed Hiccup. "That's normal."

Ylva sniffed. She focused on scooping the thyme into the pot and Astrid's hard stare went unacknowledged.

"I want to," Hiccup repeated, already at the door. He stood on his good leg and juggled yanking the iron grip and keeping his balance.

Astrid hurried to take the weight of the door. Hiccup huffed a thanks and exited quickly.

"We don't have to go anywhere," Astrid said as soon as she closed the door behind her. "We can sit on the steps and wait for Hacket." 

It actually sounded better than hanging around inside with his wife.

"I don't need to sit anymore."

Hiccup, it seemed, had other plans and had already begun to lurch down the rough slope. Two hands gripped the crutch and he put barely any weight on his peg leg, jumping between foot and crutch, foot and crutch.

Astrid hastened to follow. "Alright, okay, just…" She hovered, falling somewhere between wanting to help him and knowing it would be unappreciated. "...take it easy."

He was a contradiction of restless exhaustion.

Hiccup slowed at the mouth of the footpath.
"I want to see—ah," he lowered his voice as a pair of Vikings stalked past with impolite stares, "I want to see Toothless."

"You will," Astrid promised, knowing Toothless felt the same. "Let's just get you... more stable on your feet. People here are suspicious. We've got to be smart—"

"I know, I know." Hiccup began limping along the path, squinting against the horizon-bound sun.

Astrid ignored his tone and matched his pace. She tried to be subtle as she observed the way he clenched his crutch, how the muscles of his neck jumped with every step of his peg. She wouldn't tell him to slow down again; she wouldn't repeat herself.

She wouldn't admit to the irrational sting she felt every time he dodged her.

Instead, Astrid decided to follow Hiccup's lead and treat him to a tour of the village. No time like the present to pass along information.

"How far did you make it when you went out?" she asked.

Hiccup glanced at her. Astrid felt him slow.

"Not far," he admitted with half a shrug that would imply he wasn't bothered. "Kept sitting."

"Well, down there is the wharf where I work... a lot." Too much, in her opinion. "I wouldn't go down there until you—well, there's a strong westbound wind."

"Ah."

"Because it faces the Summer Current."

"Ah."

"Irpa's place is up there." She pointed to the distant flathouse on the western slope. "It's a good place to stop by if you need anything."

He followed her gesture, noting the long, curving paths and uphill climb.

"It's a walk, yeah." Astrid didn't look at him when she said it. "But sometimes I get to work the gardens she has all around there. I might be able to sneak you some herbs if you need anymore. I mean, if they short you or—or if you're in too much pain—"

"I'm good," Hiccup said, followed quickly by, "Do you like Irpa?"

"More than most here," she answered honestly. She had to stop bringing up anything involving his leg before he got angry.

Hiccup nodded.

"Me too."

"Village center's down this path," Astrid went on. "People hang out by the well a lot. Over there's the smithy, with the smoke. See it? They won't let me work there. And right over here's the tannery. An older couple works there—Gerd and... uh, Es..."

"Esbjorn," Hiccup finished for her. He snickered at her startle. "Oh yeah, I stopped by there when I went out earlier." Hiccup lifted a hand off his crutch at the man inside. The short, dumpy one that
muttered a prayer when Astrid first walked those same paths. She was surprised to see the man return Hiccup's wave with a pressed smile.

"He's a bit of the local vulva," Hiccup informed her. "Not actually one, though. He does most of the leather and owns most of the cattle." He paused, glancing at the pastures behind them. "Well, his wife does. He does a lot of the trading and stuff. Super religious. He's got little icons inside if you want to look. He might throw blessed ale on you though."

Astrid shook her head. "I'm sorry, did you get his whole life story too? Grandkids?"

"I don't think he has any kids so…"

Hiccup grinned at her, some of the wasted dig of his cheeks filling out, and Astrid couldn't tell if he were serious.

"Why do they talk to you and not me?" She hoped to Odin she wasn't pouting, but she sure felt like it. She'd been with the Reef Warriors for weeks and Esbjorn had done little more than grumble prayers at her.

Astrid hadn't realized they'd stopped until Hiccup started walking again.

He used the crutch too heavily. She kept quiet.

"Because," Hiccup said, breathy. "I'm… non-threatening."

"Because you're a curiosity," came a deep, familiar voice at their backs.

"Hackett!" Astrid exclaimed, turning.

The chief leaned on a stone partition separating the uphill pastures from the path they walked. Long grass swayed violently behind him in the very westbound sea breeze Astrid mentioned before. Dandelion quills fluttered to life, rising and falling like tiny ships on a clear sea. They stuck to his tunic and blended into the grey-blond of his hair.

Hackett grinned at Astrid before climbing over the partition with astounding swiftness for his age. He was likely younger than her own father, yet Astrid had trouble reconciling a young chief, having only known Stoick and other aged and hearty ruling men.

For the first time, Astrid was struck with the question of how long Hackett had even been chief. Five years? Ten?

"Everybody's been waiting to hear that you'd kicked it," Hackett said easily to Hiccup. "Then you go and get up and walk around. Curiosity."

"Thanks…?" Hiccup said, glancing at Astrid several times.

Astrid was more interested in the satchel slung over Hackett's shoulder.

"What's that?"

"Ah," he lifted the satchel, loose in his hand, and swung it around his back. "Plants for Ylva. From Irpa's. No matter. Come on, she's waitin' for us."

Hackett started back on the path they just covered and they followed as expected. Hiccup seemed to keep up all right, but Astrid stuck close to him knowing the climb up would be worse.
"Actually," Hackett said, turning so that the profile of his angled nose struck out against the sun like bird of prey, "now that you're up it's about time we properly talked about what's going to happen to you."

Hiccup shared an alarmed look with Astrid. "Happen to me?"

Hackett turned forward. "Well, you might have been here a few weeks, but we still don't know anything about you and I'm not comfortable with having curiosities loose in my village. No offense, but we have nothing but your word-no noise from the Danger Brutes, no claim or call for help-and that's not good enough."

Hiccup opened his mouth but Astrid, stomach tight, cut before him.

"I get it. I do."

When Hackett looked back again, Astrid saw a fondness to his face, and some of that unease slackened. Even as he continued at a pace Hiccup could barely keep up with.

"I know you do," and something about the way he said you told Astrid he didn't think Hiccup thought the same. She was inclined to agree. "My point is, I'm not so comfortable with you two in my village, seeing our lifestyle and learning our world. I don't know how much longer I'll allow you here."

"Just… just give me a couple more days to recover," Hiccup said. He was slowing, teetering, Astrid placed a hand on his back to steady him and when he sent her a pink-cheeked and furious look she glared right back. She felt the ridges of his spine, rather than the muscle that left the bone indented that she was so used to on herself.

"Well," Hackett cleared his throat. He stopped at the door and put a hand to it. His eyes slipped over the supportive arm she had at Hiccup's back to find Astrid's. "I've brought it up before. You can always become a part of our tribe. Saying that you have nowhere else to go, of course. Or...if you prefer it."

The fact that his voice lowered told Astrid that he was on board with this, but they both knew Ylva wouldn't be. Even if abandoning Berk would ever be an option and Astrid allowed herself to consider the idea, she didn't think she could live comfortably on the same island as Ylva. Not while sandwiched between two tribes she was raised to distrust.

"Who knows what's left of your village if you were prisoners," Hackett went on, and Astrid felt she must have bore a facial expression that was too hostile to the idea. "Or those you knew having been attacked…"

"We'll… we have to think about it," Hiccup said. Hackett looked at Hiccup as though he'd forgotten he'd even been there. Astrid stared as well, disbelieving. Hiccup gave his wry smile. "Just, let me get used to my leg. Figure things out."

"It's the figuring things out that I take issue with," Hackett muttered and he pushed the door open. Astrid could hear the heavy chop of a knife against wood as she braced Hiccup up the steps.

"I'll keep working," she said over Hiccup's shoulder. She entered the threshold herself and felt a blast of heat warm her cheeks. She hadn't realized how cool it had gotten outside.

Ylva scraped bloodied slabs of fish into the bubbling broth. The flames ran high in the hearth. Long, guttering shadows stretched across the floor.
"Hey, dear," Hackett murmured as he kissed Ylva. He rubbed her side and handed over the satchel.

Ylva looked inside, gave him a tight smile, and patted his chest. "Thank you."

"I can help, too!" said Hiccup pipped up, hobbling after Hackett. He tried to stop by the meal table but Astrid nudged him toward the bench. Hiccup's resistance was either minimal or weak. He lowered himself with a scowl, one Astrid easily ignored in favor of a pointed look at the tight, tremulous hold he had on the crutch. She had felt the sweat on his back, felt the breath rattle through his ribs. He needed to sit.

Hackett snorted as he shed layers in the warmth of the house, pulling a long knife from his belt and settling it against the wall. "An' what can you do?"

Indignation swelled on Hiccup's behalf, but a careless wave of Hiccup's hand dispersed the anger before Astrid could form a retort in his defense.

"I can smith," he said. He had a stubborn set to his jaw but all Astrid saw was the contrast of his freckles. She swore he had gone a shade paler since they left the house. She wished they hadn't, now. She should have said something earlier—something to Ylva—something more. Stupid.

Hackett turned to Hiccup. "You?"

He paid no attention to Ylva hurrying forward, grabbing the sword he set down and taking it upstairs.

Astrid was reminded of her first conversation with the chief. How he seemed amused at her claim of being a warrior. She still hadn't taught him better.

Hiccup shrugged, unruffled by the scoff. "I was an apprentice in a smithy. Actually... I'd like use of your forge anyway, to make a better prosthetic."

"What's wrong with that one?" Ylva asked from above.

"It's ill-fitted. Which I get," Hiccup added, hurried. "I was unconscious. I know all that, but I... I think it would help—help with, with the healing—if I had one that fit better."

"You don't need a forge to make a prosthetic," Hackett pointed out. "I can have one whittled for yeh in a day."

"I can whittle my own," Hiccup pushed back. He leaned forward, a hand clenched on his left knee. "But I'd rather have metal."

Hackett sighed—the sort of humoring sigh Astrid vaguely recalled from their earliest interactions.

"Look—"

"You don't need to be doing anything other than healing," Ylva said over her husband, making her return.

For once, Astrid agreed with her.

**Next Up: Hiccup's a visionary. Astrid consider's Hackett's proposition.**

Chapter End Notes
This was a very slow update and I'm so sorry! Thank you for your patience!
Chapter Summary

Hiccup grows more mobile by the day and Astrid feels the pressure to make a decision.

Chapter Notes

Astrid had limited experience with amputation. Intimate experience, anyway, as Berk was always losing a limb or two for as long as she was alive. Her uncle lost most of a hand to a Moldruffle when she was ten. She recalled him swearing a lot in the wake of a raid and holding a mess of blood and absence to his chest. Two days later she saw him, red-faced and cheery as always, sporting a heavily bandaged hand and making jokes, making promises, drinking... Three weeks later he was scowling and throwing his tankard across the mead hall. Short-tempered. Frustrated. Changed. In half a year he was learning how to shoot a crossbow with two fingers and tossing her, one handed, in the air. Somehow, her uncle again.

Then there was her own left foot: her pinky toe gone, the next toe just a stub. She was seven at the time, when she dropped her mother's axe, practicing with a weapon she wasn't ready for. The pain was impossible to recollect now, but she remembers being carried to the house and the eyes of the villagers and her mother's anger. How she shouted at her, white faced: If you're going to lose a body part, for Thor's sake, have it be by a dragon!

Astrid wondered if that counted for Hiccup. A dragon-loss of a limb.

What she didn't remember—for herself or for her uncle—was the sleeping.

Hiccup spent a lot of time asleep and Astrid felt a childish dislike of it. He'd been unconscious enough, in her opinion. She'd rather he were awake and eating, speaking to her. Allaying her loneliness, reminding her that she wasn't the sole Hooligan on that island. Reminding her that he had survived and that she had an heir to take home to Berk.

But Hiccup would sleep right after eating, and he slept periodically throughout the day. Sometimes he was asleep when she shuffled in at the end of work, with the light of a sinking sun casting long shadows over his bundled form. He'd nibble on whatever Ylva had prepared and lay down, or so she'd been told by Hackett.

She had gotten so used to seeing him asleep that Astrid found herself surprised to find Hiccup awake and sitting on the bed when she was about to leave for the docks one morning.

"Wait up," he called, slipping a boot on his one good foot.

Astrid paused by the table. She grabbed one of two hard rolls Ylva had left. She imagined the woman was upstairs somewhere, lurking, listening to them.

Rarely did she leave them both alone in the house.

"You're awake," she said.
"That I am."

"Are you coming to work with me?" Astrid asked, noting that she was probably being eavesdropped on.

Hiccup pushed up from the bed and shifted over to where his crutch rested against the wall. He did so bent, with one hand braced against the furs, supporting him like a third leg.

"I just...want to get out." Hiccup straightened, notched the crutch under his arm and combed his fingers through his hair a couple times and said, brightly, "I'll walk with you."

Astrid shrugged and took a bite of the hard roll. She knew Fisk would give her some weak ale with it at the wharf.

"Here," she said through a mouthful and held out the other roll. "Eat this."

Hiccup spared the bread a glance, the residue of sleep still clinging to the corners of his eyes. He shook his head. "I'm not hungry."

"I don't care," Astrid said shortly.

Hiccup leaned back from the roll she pushed in his face. "Just have both of them. You're working—"

"You're healing," Astrid interrupted. "You need to eat more than I do."

His color had returned and so had his spunk, but Hiccup was painfully thin and his poor appetite—natural or brought on by the trauma—tormented Astrid. Maybe he wasn't hungry. Maybe she was being selfish. She didn't care. If he was going to sleep for the majority of their stay then he'd damn well humor her with his health. Even if she knew, in their short time with the Reef Warriors, that Hiccup pushed back when he was pushed, and was stubborn for the sake of being stubborn, and, despite all his horrendously orchestrated cries for attention, he didn't like having his independence questioned. He didn't like being told what to do, or lead by the hand, or...

Sure enough, Hiccup's chin shifted forward, as, Astrid was learning, it did when he was about to become belligerent.

Something creaked overhead. Astrid maintained her stare, kept the roll offered.

Another moment passed before, incredibly, Hiccup took the bread. Pouting and petulant, with his top lip tucked under so that the stray, unchecked hairs were more prominent amidst his freckles, but now with a breakfast in hand.

Astrid was tempted to glare at him until he ate it, but she took the victory let it go with a smile.

"Fisk feeds me anyway," Astrid added as they both moved to the door. She took another bite, rubbing her knuckles along the corner of her mouth. "He's always got dried meats and ale. Not to mention the fish. He's got a cousin, a beet farmer, that preserves them in this, like, vinegar stuff... I don't know exactly what he does to it but I'll get you some. It's so good." Astrid yanked open the door and called into the house. "We're heading out!"

It almost felt normal, this routine. Coming and leaving and grabbing a setout breakfast and announcing her whereabouts as she did so.

Hiccup followed, moving more smoothly on his crutch than she'd seen yet.
"So you don't mind working down there," he asked.

Astrid was pleased to see him start in on his roll. She pretended not to notice.

"It's growing on me," she admitted.

They started down the hill where the village already bustled. The sun had risen a good three fingers over the horizon, which meant Fisk, and other fishermen, had been active for hours. The forge was in full swing, clinking hammers and pumping bellows. The birds had begun to quiet their dawn songs and the farmers were pausing their work for a spot of breakfast and children were just rousing, starting on their chores and training.

"I got to find some work around here," Hiccup said suddenly. Astrid noted that he chewed his bread with his mouth closed. And slowly.

"Are—" Are you feeling up to it, is what she nearly asked, but something told her not to push her luck after the bread roll victory. "You have anything in mind?"

Hiccup shrugged his free shoulder.

"Maybe with you." He had turned away, regarding the northern pastures, where sheep bayed and lounged in the bright, morning sun. "Over at the docks, you know?"

If Astrid were honest with herself, an extra presence with Fisk would be welcomed. She got on better with him than ever, but Astrid still found herself tolerating his long stares and constant chatter.

She didn't know if the docks were the safest place for Hiccup, with the distance and the moisture.

"I'll ask Fisk," she promised. "See if he wouldn't mind an extra pair of hands." And, if not, she'd ask Hackett.

"But first..." Hiccup glanced around. They were still alone. Everyone in their shops. Everyone in their own business. "I need to... I need to see..."

Astrid understood. Now that Hiccup was aware and mobile and working up to a sense of autonomy, he could shift his priorities.

Toothless.

"Before they give you a schedule, you want—"

"Yeah," Hiccup said, short. "Yeah, I'd... when can I—"

"Hello, Hiccup!"

The call came from their right. A girl stepped from the tannery, hair held back by a handkerchief. Astrid recognized her immediately as the girl who first pointed her towards Irpa's homestead weeks ago.

Hiccup's furtive posture of seconds earlier evaporated. He grinned. "Embla, hi!"

Astrid had to stop short as Hiccup changed course and limped toward the tannery.

"Embla..." she deadpanned. Of course he knew her name. He'd been awake days and it seemed he knew everybody's name.
The girl's smile might have dimmed as Astrid approached, or it could have just been what Astrid expected. They stood nearly at eye-level with one another, though the girl—woman, perhaps—was older. Late teens, if Astrid had to guess. She had two, beige scars scraping down her neck, likely years old, and what appeared to be a large birthmark creeping from the collar of her shirt. She was round-faced, with eyes a shade lighter than her hair and wide nostrils.

Pretty, too.

Hiccup turned, adjusting the crutch under his arm. "Astrid, you know Embla, right?"

"Yeah," Astrid said, slowly. Outside of their one exchange, they'd barely interacted. Astrid saw her once when running an errand down by the docks. They might have made eye contact.

Embla nodded. "I'm Gerd's niece," she said, as though it somehow better introduced her. Astrid barely knew Gerd—the tall, grey-haired wife of the village shaman. A co-runner of the tannery. It would explain why Embla was there so often...

"And this is Lefsi," Embla said with a thumb over her shoulder.

A shadow within the tannery moved, stepping closer between hanging furs until a man emerged. He stood nearly a head and a half taller than any of them, with a long, thing frame, strong arms, and tanned skin. His curly brown hair was cut close to his head, as was his beard. He had a strong bridge to his nose, curved in a manner that would suggest it had been broken once or twice in his life and never set properly.

He had the same dark, dark eyes Astrid saw on Ylva. Nearly black.

Astrid had to suppress a scream when he first moved. Her arms veined, strained, and she had to mentally scold herself for not sensing the man earlier. She used to be more aware of her surroundings.

"Oh hey," she heard Hiccup say.

Astrid rubbed the tension out of her arms. One would think she'd be more vigilant given her situation. Between the distrust and the discomfort and having an inexcusable amount of distractions...

"Hiccup, yeah? Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Outside of her discreet workouts to get back in shape—situps when she was alone outside. Pull-up on tree-branches. A post on Fisk's lean-to she'd strengthen her knuckles against, familiarize the muscles in her arms with—Astrid hadn't sharpened her mind. She mustn't have. She—

"Shouldn't you be with Fisk?" Astrid glanced up at Lefsi's direct question. She didn't bother to hide her frown. He smelled of a sickly-sweet relaxant herb and she could see it up close—the dark juices between his teeth as he chewed.

"I'm getting there," she grumbled, giving her arm one last rub. So she was a bit later than usual. What did he care—?

Oh.

Lefsi turned over his shoulder and spit the gathered juices, waiting for a response.
*Lefsi.* One of Fisk's relations. Something about the name had rung familiar; it had probably been dropped in one-sided conversation half-a-dozen times by now.

"That might be my fault," Hiccup volunteered. Astrid turned, brow lifted at the fib, but Hiccup didn't look at her. He kept his gaze on Lefsi, scratching at the back of his neck.

"I never see you out this early," Embla said to Hiccup.

The corner of his lip twitched. "I guess I'm feeling more energized."

"Been mostly sleeping," Astrid added.

"Can't get any practice if you're sleeping," Lefsi pointed out, jerking a long finger at Hiccup's leg. Embla struck Lefsi in the side before Astrid could even think of a scathing response.

"Sleeping is necessary, you clod. You don't, you don't say things like—ow!"

Lefsi knocked her on the backside of her shoulder.

"I ain't wrong, am I? Am I?"

"Don't you—!" She punched him again and Lefsi laughed, showing off stained teeth. "Ya dragon stinking lug!"

Astrid stole a look at Hiccup, who, while caught off guard, didn't seem too offended.

"I guess I'm practicing now, then," he said and did a little show of holding his crutch out and taking a step on his peg. He had another small grin as he preformed. Astrid couldn't tell if he were being polite or mild mannered.

"Alright?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said, watching Embla readjust the white cloth she bound her braids with.

He kept the smiles on his face to a minimum because he was being polite, Astrid told herself, and not because he was in any sort of pain.

"Good," she said. "Then why don't you go for a walk?"

This time Hiccup did meet her eyes. Astrid watched the comprehension dawn. She lent a subtle nod, which he returned with an appreciative smile. Just as small but somehow more genuine than she'd seen that morning.

"Enjoy what scenes?" asked Lefsi. His eyes went straight to his leg with little regard. "You can see everything from where you're standin' just fine."

Astrid shrugged and pushed some of her hair from her face. "I don't mind walking to those eastern cliffs to dump fish guts." She pointed to the forest dotting the side of the village closest to the chief's house. "The trees are nice and relaxing. It's quiet."

"The trees are nice… and relaxing?" Embla repeated, slowly, with the heaviest stare Astrid had ever known.

"They calm your mind," Hiccup said quickly. He flashed Astrid another quick and thankful grin. "I could use some mind calming."
He had already turned, left shoulder risen with the crutch nestled and secure in his pit.

Embla blew out a pitched breath between the gap in her teeth. "You easterners are weird."

Hiccup ignored her. "Those trees?" he pointed to the east. "Not those ones." He pointed to the northwest, the small patch near Irpa's home. "Right."

"Right." Astrid cleared her throat. "Well, I'm only familiar with those on the east, so..."

She found herself staring down at her feet, pretending to adjust the belt around her waist. Her voice had started that loose, wavery thing when she was telling half-truths.

"East it is," Hiccup said jovially. "Some worn paths will probably make things easier for me." He lifted his peg leg and gave it a little shake.

Embla held her hands up, utterly bemused.

"Wait—hold it. You're just going to go in the woods alone?" She looked at Astrid. "You're gonna —" She turned back to Hiccup, braids swinging. "Look, if you wait I'll have this next order done and I can come with."

Hiccup's face whitened. "Oh, that's not—you don't have to—"

"What's going to happen to him?" Astrid cut in. "He'll fall? He's a big boy." She wanted to laugh as she said it. Hiccup was anything but big.

Somehow, she got the sense Hiccup knew exactly where her thoughts were directed, especially when she patted his shoulder.

Embla did laugh. Lefsi joined. Hiccup's gratitude of earlier mettled with annoyance and Astrid let loose a giggle.

"Sorry," she said, unapologetic.

"Hilarious," he deadpanned.

"Look, you do what you got to do. Just get back before the storm," Lefsi advised. He spit over his shoulder.

Astrid swallowed the rest of her mirth. "What storm?"

Outside of a few bright, white clouds the skies were clear and sun showered down on them with the heat of autumn.

Lefsi shook his head.

"You never seem so eastern until you say shit like that."

"It's the wires here that will catch the netting. You want to keep these as tight as you can..."

Fisk pushed the thick pads of his thumbs against the metal imbuend rock until the small weight
appeared a clear, solid mass.

"I got it," Astrid replied, and did the same to the one in her lap. The light, pale stone, now wrapped in wire and metal, was attached to the newly constructed fishnet along with twelve others just like it. The net itself was a work in progress, and the Reef Warriors needed several of the same; not many survived the winds and tides that winter wrought.

Before the Reef, Astrid knew the basics of fishing. She knew how to cast and wait. She knew how to sense a bite and when to pull. She could, three times out of five, return with a catch. Back on Berk, she was passable at fishing.

Now she'd be rather good at it. Not just when aiming for a catch or two, but for a netful. She could tell a clove hitch from a sheetbend and how to construct a usable trawl for the right tide. She'd be able to know where a bullhook would be more effective and when a spear would be and the sort of bait that'd be best for each season.

She'd even grown to like Fisk's need to make noise. His once mindless chatter became a background hum and an unlikely source of information. Irpa and Hackett were cousins. There was a storm three years back that wiped out more of their livestock than a month of dragon raids and they were still recovering from it. Never take a boat out on an overcast day; storms strike faster than lightning this far south.

Fisk ran a finger under his nose and worked on the other end of the net.

"So, local fishing's going to shift a bit soon," he commented. "I'll be making some trades down south."

Down south must have meant the Lava Louts.

Astrid tried to concentrate on not getting her fingers caught in the netting.

"And," Fisk gave a light cough and another sniff against the cold. "Well, seeing as you'll be—well, you're still here 'n all—I was thinking—"

"You fish all through the winter?" Astrid asked quickly. She had a sinking feeling on what Fisk was going to mention. Or ask.

Fisk looked up, seeming bemused at Astrid's interest.

"Well," he began, squinting at the process in his hands. "We get a few different breeds through here—current keeps things warm if we travel far enough south—but things slow down a lot in the winter. It's rough but we tend to shift to trades and ice.

Astrid nodded. Then hissed when a twist of metal pinched the fleshy side of her thumb.

"Alright?"

"Yeah."

"Hn. Well, funny thing is, usually we'd be fighting off dragons trying to keep our fish but… There's not been none. You notice that?"

"Oh. Um…"

Astrid gave an exaggerated, thoughtful frown. Her nod was slow, but her mind raced, trying to
remember if the Swallows got raided. They must have, right? Growing up on Berk, Astrid assumed all Viking settlements dealt with dragons.

But if they didn't and she agreed… if she slipped up with something else that got back to Hackett, another chink in their story…

Heavy footsteps thudded down the boardwalk. Astrid might have welcomed a further distraction from the topic she knew Fisk intended to return to if she didn't feel the urgency in their pace. The dock was soaked and slippery from unruly waters; no one should be walking that fast.

Astrid thought she might have lost her mind when she saw Ylva stalking down the dock. Ylva who, in the month Astrid had been there, hadn't bothered to venture as far down as the docks. She moved her shoulders like a paddle. Stiff and uniform with little fluidity to her weighty steps.

She would have been hard to knock down, Astrid would admit that much.

"Ylva!" Fisk greeted happily. "Hackett's on the third tier, sorry."

Ylva stopped with her fists on her hips and stared at Astrid. Astrid, sitting knee-to-knee with Fisk, her fingers snarled in line, tried not to shrink back with the power of it.

"Where's the boy?" Ylva demanded.

"Hiccup?" Astrid tried to keep that same dramatized frown she had just used on Fisk. "He went for a walk."

Ylva wasn't having it. Her eyes seemed as dark as the water, which had developed an inky sort of shine under the gathering storm clouds.

"That was nearly an hour ago," she said. "He can't still be in there."

Astrid shrugged, moving her fingers through the netting but keeping gaze with Ylva. "He's not moving too fast these days, if you haven't noticed."

Her fingers slowed all the same. In there…

In the forest.

Something in her stomach slumped—the breakfast she ate, perhaps, now crushed under the weight of foreboding. How did Ylva know when or where Hiccup went?

"Don't sass me," Ylva snapped. "He's been in there too long."

"He's fine," Astrid deadpanned, but now she desperately wished for Hiccup to appear out of nowhere, if only to get Ylva off her back. The fine mist from the breaking beachcombers didn't help. It thickened the air, the tension, along with the baying, moored ships banging against the docks and the rising seaward and the twisting clouds.

Ylva waved a thick arm. She had her sleeves pushed to her elbows with the edges of a dark tattoo just visible by the crook of her elbow.

"He could be hurt," Ylva ranted. "Fallen somewhere with that bad leg of his waiting for someone to find him."

"He's fine." Hiccup would be fine if he were with Toothless. He wouldn't be fine if he were found with Toothless.
"This isn't the time for him to be off alone! It's the worst of it."

Astrid stopped her netting. She felt an edge in her throat rise to saturate her next words with threat. Hackett wasn't around and she knew in her bones that Fisk wouldn't berate her.

Tell Hackett hours later? Yes. But right now Astrid felt confident in saying what she needed to say and how she needed to say it.

"Leave him alone."

Ylva's chin lifted as her mouth curled downward.

"Don't you tell me my business. I'll do as I do." She spun on her heel and stalked back to the soft climb off the Wharf.

Astrid stood. The net dropped.

"Sorry," she muttered to Fisk before whisking after Ylva.

Somehow unsurprised, Astrid felt the dock shake as Fisk followed her, probably thinking this was more entertaining than his own livelihood.

Catching up to Ylva proved a trite more difficult than Astrid anticipated. The woman had a powerwalk unimpeded by slippery boards. Astrid dodged water Ylva kicked up in her march and hovered at the woman's heels with no doubt in her mind that Ylva would knock her off the dock if she tried to come around.

"Hiccup likes his independence," she blew out. "He's been going crazy. He just needs—he—he's probably communicating with nature. With, uh," Crap, for all the times her learnings had to fail her. Who was that god? The one with the trees and—oh, "Jörð!"

"Don't want to disturb him if he's prayin'." Fisk was smiling like this was all a big joke. It probably was to him.

He was a step behind Astrid, close enough that she could hear his thudding footfalls and feel the casual brush of his arm against her tunic.

"He doesn't get independence when he's living under another's roof," Ylva snapped. "And I won't be having him hiding away like he is. Unacceptable."

Ylva took the stairs two at a time but Astrid was better now. She was working constantly and building her strength, her agility, and a short sprint had her standing before Ylva with her hair in her mouth, her fists clenched and her knees bent, ready to duck should the woman ever take a swing at her.

"Get out of my way," Ylva snarled. "Or I will move you myself."

Astrid felt iron in her gut. Energy shot through her shoulders; it might have come from her muscles or the air, she couldn’t quite tell. All she knew was that a light buzz started around her head and the rest of the world fell from her peripheral. She didn't know if the blurs in the background were people stopping their day to watch or if no one but Fisk was present.

Astrid forced calm into her voice. "Hiccup just needs some fresh air. He's been surrounded by people since he got here. You can give him an hour to himself."
Hiccup was a private person, she recalled. She wondered if that affected him at all. If the lie were, in fact, a lie.

Ylva's face was thunderous and she made to keep walking. "He doesn't get that sort of privilege and don't you touch me!"

Astrid's hand was thrown from the sleeve she had grabbed but she returned to her blockade, ready to shift in any directly Ylva should move.

"I said to leave him alone."

She didn't care anymore. Astrid planted her feet as Ylva lifted a hand. She'd break it. She would break that b—

"Ah," Fisk's voice managed to break through the mounting tension. "Maybe we shouldn't—right out here—"

For such a large man, Fisk could make himself seem remarkably small. He hovered at both women's side with his hands fiddling around his collar, peeking over his shoulder at the rest of the village. It suddenly wasn't funny for him any longer.

Ylva's lips were pressed. Astrid could see a vein bulge around her left temple with the clench of her jaw. Her sharp eyes jumped over Astrid's head, probably picking up on her setting and who watched. Her nostrils flared and her hand lowered further.

Disappointment nettled the back of Astrid's neck like a rash that needed to be ignored; the energy building inside her would never find a proper release. Not without an axe and a tree

Ylva took a step closer, lowered her head and said, "If you're to stay here any longer, then I think you either take a proper place or leave."

"We'll leave!" Astrid snapped.

Ylva's laugh sounded almost cruel. "And where will you go?"

"She can have a place on this island," Fisk piped up.

"You don't get to decide that," Ylva snarled, turning back to Astrid. "My husband and I do. And I don't see you fitting well around here…. for long."

Astrid was sure Ylva would make it impossible for her to ever feel comfortable with the Reef Warriors.

"Hey!"

All three turned.

Limping down the steep slope from the village center like he was fighting for his life, with the biggest smile on his stupid, dopey face, was Hiccup.

The tension snapped like a twig.

Fisk offered a half a wave. Ylva had yet to turn back to Astrid, but Astrid could only imagine the look on the woman's face.

As for her, she was both ready to kill Hiccup and kiss him.
Hiccup's dependence on his crutch seemed worse than ever. He held onto its wood with both hands like a sailor being pulled from the sea, the crux jammed into his armpit. He had smudges along his tunic and coating the base of his trousers with a few stray leaves clinging to the threads.

"What happened to you!" Ylva exclaimed.

"Fell," Hiccup answered simply as he hobbled closer.

Ylva turned and sent a stare that dared Astrid to ever question her again.

"He's fine!" Astrid said immediately.

The woman pointed a thick finger in her face. "I told you—"

"I'm fine!" Hiccup piped up, coming to a stop by Ylva's side. "I'm just… see? I'm fine. I'm going to see Irpa real quick to make sure."

"What'd you do? Climb a tree?" Fisk asked. "How many times did you fall?"

"I wanted to see if I could run through the woods. I can't. That was a mistake. Astrid, can you help?"

"Yeah, here…" Astrid plucked the crutch from his grip and replaced the support at Hiccup's side. His arm came around her shoulders. He had an odd smell about him. Somewhat fishy and basic. Astrid had no doubt he'd been given a proper dragon bath.

They both did a stupendous job of ignoring Ylva's glower.

"We're just going to Irpa's," Astrid reiterated. She would pretend that they hadn't almost come to blows if Ylva did the same. And if Fisk kept his big mouth shut.

"Need help?" Fisk offered.

"Nope!" Astrid tried to force Hiccup along quickly, finding it easy to crush any regret at his discomfort. Fool brought it on himself.

When she glanced back she saw Ylva with her arms crossed below her bust, scowling at their backs with Fisk speaking in lower tones. Neither followed.

Relief settled over Astrid like strong tea-and, gods, did she miss strong tea. The kind her uncle used to make that had the miraculous ability to make every problem melt away. She could use some now. Her head hurt and her stomach felt loose and sore, as though everything in her body had been clenched too tightly for too long.

"Toothless happy to see you?" she asked.

Hiccup was wincing horribly as they moved but he seemed lighter. His face shifted between grimace and grin with every step.

"Yeah," he had a youthful, breathy laugh to his voice. "Yeah he's… it was great. He's okay—"

"It better have been great," Astrid interrupted. "Ylva was ready to go in there after you. She already wants me off this island and you didn't help."

It was hard to tell with how much of his weight she was taking, but Astrid thought he had the audacity to shrug at her.
"We'll get off," he decided. "I just have to get in a forge and build a new tailfin."

She sighed. "Hiccup, they'll notice materials missing. Even if they let you in there…"

They certainly wouldn't let her in there.

"It could take some time…" Hiccup said slowly. "But if I play out this recovery thing—let them think we're deciding to join—I can chip away at getting us some supplies."

"Or," Astrid threw in. "We could join and you'd be allowed to make a new tailfin without sneaking around."

"But would you be willing to do that?" he asked. She heard his breath in her ear, the way it hitched with certain footing. She smelled Toothless's slobber stronger than ever, even with the surging winds.

Astrid stared ahead at the sinking, orange glow behind a veil of clouds. She thought of Fisk and how he looked at her, knowing what he hoped for made her stomach roll. She thought of Ylva and her heavy hand, how it had only been Hackett's distant fondness toward Astrid that stretched her tolerance.

She thought of home and Berk and the swell of pride she felt every time she thought of it. She thought of her uncle's tea and her mother's fingers in her hair and quiet, passing shadows of her favorite training spot in the forest.

"If it means getting home I could." Her voice sounded weak to her own ears. Irpa's house loomed. The smoke stack worked with a thin stream of grey-white smoke that told Astrid the fire might be dying.

Hiccup's breathing grew more ragged in her ear and she slowed down, wincing at the pace she had accidentally set for him. It must have been his joy that kept him from saying anything.

Astrid shifted to hold more of Hiccup's weight under her and knocked against Irpa's door. She could feel Hiccup tremble against her. A pale shine had overtaken his forehead.

"Leg okay?" she asked. A raven cawed overhead. A chill blew in from the west.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Hiccup huffed, but his high of earlier appeared to have died down. He seemed tired and pained; leaning on her without reserve.

"You shouldn't have pushed yourself," Astrid griped. The strain and smell were starting to bother her.

Hiccup opened his mouth. The door swung backward and Irpa stood in its place at her towering five feet.

"Ah," she said, eyes flickering over the pair of them, lingering over Hiccup's leg. "What'd you do?"

"Went running," Astrid said in time with Hiccup's quick-blurted, "Running."

Irpa's mouth twisted to form a rather unattractive grimace. She shuffled backwards and gestured indoors. "In."

Astrid led Hiccup into the dusky home, where, as she predicted, a pile of white ash smoldered in the central hearth. Hiccup pulled away and Astrid let him. She handed over his crutch and rolled her
freed shoulder. Hiccup might be light but he was spindly.

"Sit," Irpa commanded.

Hiccup plopped down on a bench opposite to the table where Irpa kept most of her projects. Astrid continued to glance around the hanging herbs and trinkets, assuming the command did not apply to her and uncaring as to whether it did. She saw half-finished pastes and piles of leaves stripped from stems, pestles of different shapes and small, sharp instruments meant for seeding.

"Leg off," Irpa ordered, getting on her knees before Hiccup. Astrid turned in time to see Irpa pull the prosthetic off before Hiccup had a chance to. Hiccup grimaced horribly and, with a harsh bite to his lip, gripped the edge of the bench.

Irpa was all business. She pushed up the bunched material of the donated trouser, where it was all raw scar tissue and blisters. Astrid saw blood and seeping abrasions. Her mouth fell ajar.

Irpa's tisking could be heard just over the hiss from her patient.

Hiccup glanced upward and Astrid looked away with a quick click to her jaw. She could feel his indignity, his insecurity. She looked back almost a second later—not at his leg, but at him—realizing she might be making things worse, weirder. She caught his eye and gave her best and most steady stare to show that he had nothing to feel shame over.

"Went running, eh?" Irpa asked with her fingers prodding all over Hiccup's stump like a pair of white spiders.

"I wasn't… running," Hiccup grumbled. It might have been the rising white smoke, but he looked paler than ever. Much like he had when he lay at the brink of death.

"I'm going to assume this is your first amputation."

Hiccup leveled a flat stare at the small woman. "Good assumption."

Irpa carried on, sponging the blood away with a cloth that smelled strongly of the sea.

"Even so, you should know better than to be so careless."

"I wasn't… running-running. I was… testing," Hiccup said mulishly as he watched Irpa dab a grey-green concoction over the puckered, raw skin of his shin. His slump told Astrid he was all too aware of his audience.

"Test failed."

Astrid snorted. Irpa spared her no glance.

"Got you a better fitting bind if you're interested," she said and Astrid knew there was no mistaking to whom she spoke. "Your ribs should be well enough to take it."

Astrid twitched and shifted under the support she currently wore.

"Thanks," she muttered.

"I'll grab it for you in a moment."

"Thanks," she repeated. "But it's not necessary—"
"Yeh want it or not?"

"I—yeah," she sighed.

She did want it. She wanted to feel secure enough to fight. She wanted something accustomed and intimate, even if she'd gotten used to the larger bind.

Irpa twisted to pick up a strip of cloth, bound tight on one side, wool fluffy and padded on the other. She began wrapping it around the freshly medicated wounds of Hiccup's leg, bound-side to skin.

Hiccup's eyes flicked up and caught Astrid's. Again, she looked away. She didn't know why she felt such discomfiture watching Hiccup getting his leg bandaged. Perhaps because his own felt so palpable. Perhaps because she could understand the desire for privacy and the detestation of having weakness flaunted. Maybe she was scared or sorry for him. Whatever the reason, she didn't want to impose. She wanted a distraction. Something to break the awkwardness.

Maybe she could get the bind herself? Offer to find it?

She opened her mouth.

"I'm thinking about working in the forge soon," Hiccup confessed.

Astrid stared. That hadn't been what he said earlier...

Irpa glanced upward and returned her concentration to wrapping fresh wool around his stump.

"How come?" she asked.

Hiccup shrugged, eyes trained on her methodical movements. "I've got experience. I want to help out around here. I can't keep making Astrid earn both our keep so… I think it'd be good."

"You'd be better off helping me here," Irpa said slowly. Something about the way she said it set Astrid's instincts haywire. Hiccup didn't seem to show any inclination towards pushing why.

"I'd be better off in the forge," Hiccup insisted. "It's… it's literally the only thing I know how to do."

"It's true," Astrid supplied, kicking herself at her delay. "He's pretty good at it."

Hiccup sent her a wane smile. "I mean, what are they afraid of? That I'm going to get my hands on a double-bladed axe?"

"Oops," Irpa returned, toneless. "Got some blisters forming here, right above the scar tissue."

"Where the wood hits my leg? I know."

"Be more careful."

"I need a better prosthetic," Hiccup insisted. "I can make a better one… at the forge."

"I made this," Irpa said and she rapped her knuckles against the cup of the peg.
Hiccup colored.

"Ah, sorry—"

"And he'll make a better one," Astrid cut in. Hiccup had a point, even outside the fact that they were better off if he were positioned to get tools. She couldn't imagine his discomfort walking around on a new amputation with irritated skin. The blisters along her face and neck were a memory now, but one she wouldn't lose quickly. Every rise of her brow, every swallow—she felt them. Walking on friction blisters must be agonizing.

She would have taken more of his weight, had she known.

Irpa squinted at her. Thin shoulders rose and fell with a shrug. "Fair does. I'll put in a word to Hackett." She braced her hands on her thighs and pushed upward. "I'll grab that bind for you."

Hiccup stared at his swabbed leg and worked his knee with concentration broken only by tightness around his eyes. Astrid thought of Irpa and her issue with having Hiccup work in the forge. Maybe it applied to him as well—keeping them away from weapons. Maybe he was also viewed as dangerous...

The Reefers were trying to keep them unarmed, off-foot, and at a disadvantage, and though it might have stemmed from the chief's home, it spread down to every villager. A united front—from Irpa's weak attempt to dissuade Hiccup, to Fisk's avoidance of allowing Astrid to do anything other than the routine, harmless work, to the way she had been constantly checked up on—ensuring she returned every blade she'd been asked to work with... All the weapons moved upstairs in Hackett's home...

Or maybe Irpa honestly thought Hiccup had some more use helping her here than in a forge. With his lack of mobility and his intelligence, sitting and thinking might have been best for him.

Astrid would bet her mother's axe it was both, but the former concerned her the most. It was an obvious truth. A translucent wool over their eyes that everyone knew about but no one spoke of. Hiccup could sense it as well. He'd sensed it faster than she had, picking up on all her cues, no matter how panicked he might have been upon waking. She considered the way he watched Irpa tuck the wool bandage into the prosthetic; Hiccup might not have a militant mind, but he could read a situation far better than she had ever given him credit for. It surprised her. And, at the same time, not.

"You'll talk to him? Hackett?" Hiccup stared at Irpa with this wide-eyed, earnest sort of look. A bit grizzled, even when clean and dressed, with his sparse facial hair and neck bones popping. He could have garnered sympathy from anyone.

And, with a terrible shock, Astrid realized he could have garnered sympathy from anyone. Had she not spent the past month breaking down her own pride and using emotions as a tool of necessity, she might not have recognized it. But Hiccup kept from blinking. His bottom lip was tucked into his large front teeth, and his thick brow pinched.

Son of a half-troll.

Irpa glanced at him a couple times from where she dug around in a chest.

"I just—I need to make something I can walk on. Really walk on," Hiccup went on and Astrid could pin-point where the dramatics melted. Hiccup could fib, but he couldn't force the raw emotion. The pain he felt was real, both lingering from the loss of a limb and physical from his discomfort. "It'll save us both in the long run. I'll be more comfortable and you won't have to waste your time with
me."

The self-deprecation sent Astrid sneering. Irpa returned and handed the bind off to Astrid without looking at her.

"I'll talk to him," Irpa promised. A thin one, but the waver of agreement was still there. "Just try and keep careful about yourself."

"I will," Hiccup said earnestly and Astrid swore it was the bright-eyed gratitude that must have sold Irpa, if anything.

"We might even end up staying," Astrid piped up. She didn't know why, but something about the way Hiccup commanded the situation in that moment set her off-foot. Impressed and threatened, like when he first kidnapped her weeks ago. "Ready to go?"

Hiccup blinked up at her. He didn't seem pleased by her ready topic change.

"You want to put that bind on?" Irpa asked.

"I will tomorrow," Astrid said, bundling the clothing in her hands. "Thank you."

She waited for Hiccup to stand, feeling, perhaps for the first time in her life, an odd detachment from him. A need to reevaluate, to revisit, the boy she grew up on the same island with. He worried her—not in the sense that he could do harm, but in the sense that he was unpredictable. That he had his own working skillset and his own agenda. And though she knew she was being paranoid—stupidly paranoid over Hiccup, of all people—she also knew she didn't know him. She couldn't control him. And she was already in a situation where she had very, very little control.

In the oncoming dusk of a shady Óðinsdagr, muggy with the final, passing heat wave autumn had to offer, Astrid enjoyed another cold bath in the chief's unit. Sweat lifted from her skin with cool release, the scent of fish scrubbed from her hair, grime swept from behind her ears and from under her arms and from the soles of her feet. She kept her lips beneath the surface and breathed softly through her nose, hoping for thinner, more breathable air to cool her insides as well.

There were two other bathhouses on the Reef Island, but Astrid felt welcome in neither. Even in light of recent rumors…

She had known for a while that the village moved as a unit, that it shifted and stared as a single entity. The mention that they might become "one of them" was known instantly. Nearly the moment Astrid said as much to Irpa. Doors were opened and closed. Some people squinted harder. Fisk tailed her even closer, popping up in the streets, far from the docks, smelling of cod and salt, fiddling with his neck and scratching at the tattoos on his arms. Gerd merely cast her eyes up and down Astrid whenever she approached the tannery while her niece, Embla, gave more polite acknowledgment (though that might have been in favor of an actual conversation they'd shared). Lefsi, never far from Embla, seemed pleased at the prospect of gaining new neighbors and would murmur, in his repetitive fashion, "Oh, yeah, yeah. Stick around. Stick around."
Oddest was Esbjorn who muttered, "May Freya give you clarity" when Astrid last stopped by for a thicker belt.

It was her actions against Ylva that really put her at odds with the village. Or part of it. Two public altercations had thrown Astrid under a spying glass. People waited for a third conflict to arise any day, and she couldn't blame them.

If they stayed—and she dearly hoped not to, despite whatever temporary benefits they might acquire—a long winter and a loss of dragon attacks might mean she and Ylva would be the Reef Warriors highest form of entertainment.

Astrid pinched a flap of dead skin on her arm and pulled. Raw, pink skin stung against the water. She dropped the discarded blister shell and watched it float by; she didn't feel the need to observe the patterns of her arms anymore—the swirls of white and pink and grey that dragonfire had adorned her with. It no longer seemed ugly, at least, but fascinating. New. Like inkless tattoos, saturated greater meaning, a greater story, than anything she could have planned.

They were the sort of scars she'd happily bear to future grandchildren as she regaled them with the harrowing tale of how she survived a battle with a dragon Queen and played her part in the end of a war, when the horror and trauma of it all dulled to nothing more than an ache and a bad memory. But she couldn't bring herself to think of such a moment, not when the matter of if she'd even have Berkian heirs came into question.

Goosebumps ran across her shoulders as the approaching night soaked up the last of the humidity. Her fingertips pruned, yet no desire to get out struck her. She didn't want to face the world outside the bathhouse, not without the answers she needed: What their next step would be. If they stayed. Joined.

And Hackett... he had become unrelenting. Asking every day. Commenting on Hiccup's improvement. Observing them over his mug with those angular, clear, grey eyes. Astrid knew his wife pushed more than anything, perhaps hoping Astrid would decide to leave and they'd be dropped off on a nearby island. She wondered how much longer she'd be welcome on that pile of hay. The closer winter came, the less time she had to stall...

Something crunched outside. Water dripped from her elbow.

Another crunch, and another. Footsteps, approaching. Steady. Uneven.

Shadows shifted under the uneven door, rippling the rusted light. The crunching grew louder.

Astrid braced her hands on the slick edge of the bath. This wasn't the first time someone approached while she bathed. She could spring over the edge and wrench the door open before the snoop escaped. She had it in her; she had her mobility back. This wasn't like a month ago, where she was cold and frightened and in too much pain to be agile about anything.

The shadow grew closer, soaking up more of the filtered light. Astrid lifted a knee, ready, her nudity the furthest thing from her mind. The crunching paused.

A short knock sounded.

"Hello?"

Astrid settled back into the water at Hiccup's tentative voice and dropped her forehead against the basin edge. Hiccup had been unconscious and at the brink of death weeks ago. It hadn't been him.
She should have known—the slighter shadow, the uneven scuff…

"It's me, Hiccup," she answered.

A pause.

"...ah."

"I'll be done in a minute."

"N-no rush! It's fine. I'll come back later."

"Wait," Astrid commanded. "I'll be out in two seconds."

She didn't need him hurting himself again moving too much. Even if he had managed to procure a station at the smithy that very morning, which hadn't ceased to amaze Astrid. All of her bluster and boasting had kept her from the job, but Hiccup's meek approach managed.

Without recent experiences, Astrid would have been irked rather than rattled.

She dunked once more, catching the sound of Hiccup's voice but missing his words. Submerged, she scrubbed the last of the suds from her hair, scratched at her forehead, neck and chest to dislodge the flakes of skin still peeling from her body.

She came back up to: "—they didn't seem to care what I touched after a while so—"

Astrid climbed out of the tub. The water had always been cold but now the air was frigid and paired badly. She hissed through chattering teeth, arms shaking as she pulled her weight over the wooden edge and toed her way over to the drying cloth. The tension of earlier, her willingness to spring out of the bath, had released quickly enough to leave her drained.

Hiccup continued to talk as she rubbed her body down with vigor.

"I mostly pulled lugnuts and buffed things," he went on through the door. "They weren't really into talking, but I got a good idea of the scrap metal they have around. If I got some more canvas or leather we'd really be in business."

Astrid shifted her new bind over her breasts, pleased at its fit.

"…At the very least I can make a tail. Measurements will be off of course. I-I—oh—"

It might have been the water in her ears, thudding as she jerked her trousers up, but Astrid thought she heard Hiccup hiss a word she'd only heard from her father.

"—I knew I should have done that when I saw him! Damn, I wasn't thinking..."

Astrid threw her tunic over her head and pushed open the door.

"You just woke up from a coma and were seeing your best friend," she said, jerking the hem of her tunic over her stomach. "You'll have another chance."

Hiccup sat with his back to the bathhouse as though it might make a modest difference. He twisted to see her. Astrid spotted ash clinging to his jaw, mixed with the peach fuzz, and noticed that his hair seemed darker than usual. A sheepish smile was sent her way.

"Still," he said. "I'll make sure to pay attention next time."
"Sounds like a promise you've made before," Astrid said dryly.

Hiccup stood with some difficulty. Astrid offered her arm. He didn't even look at it, muttering, "I got this."

The stubborn show of independence didn't stop her next words.

"Do you need any help… in there?"

She couldn't believe what she was asking, but Hiccup hadn't bathed since he'd woken nearly two weeks ago, when Irpa had helped him. The prospect made her grimace but if he needed the help…

"No," he said quickly. "I can do this." He turned, and then paused at the doorway. "Ylva just left to find Hackett so there's no one in the house right now."

Astrid felt a sting of shame that he felt the need to inform her of this. Even worse that it was appreciated.

"I think I'll hang around for a bit," she said.

"In case I fall and need help," Hiccup said through the door as he latched it shut from the inside.

"No," she muttered. Honestly she wanted to avoid the house at all costs. The most welcoming spots on that island were in the forest with Toothless and any moments alone with Hiccup.

She settled down on the same spot Hiccup had been moments before—a protruding rock in the path already dusted by the bottom of Hiccup's long tunic.

"So how was the smithy?" she asked.

"Wasn't I just telling you that?"

"I wasn't listening."

Hiccup groaned. If she strained her ears she could hear the plips of water being shifted. She could probably picture exactly where he climbed in, how submerged he was...

Astrid grimaced. No thank you.

She stared over the village. At the three rungs set in stone and the tall grasses mixed with powdered dandelions that sprung around the mossy stone hedges in pillowy clouds. Birds twittered to her left and right. The buzz of the leafhoppers heightened to overtake the faint crash of waves and the gentle knocking of moored ships.

She closed her eyes and tried to turn the muted voices below into Berkian sounds. Morgless bellowing at his daughters to finish their chores, Sven kicking the same wooden gate post when his sheep ran off, the giggles of Mulch and Bucket and the faint knocking of kids practicing battle with toy swords and shields.

She'd do it on the wharf. Close her eyes with some ill-repaired fishing equipment in her hand and pretend she was relaxing at the pier. As a small girl she used to sit on the docks as her uncles unloaded ships and she wasn't to move until they left. They'd play a game where she'd keep tally on who carried off the most cargo and the loser had to carry her home. She grew to love that spot, the barnacles digging into her back as she'd sit against a post, the slight dampness to her leggings and the smell of soaked wood and algae and salt with the gulls and the crew all cawing at each other. The
A Astrid felt tightness in her chest. She didn't want to become a part of the Reef Warriors, even if it would help them avoid trouble. She wanted to go home.

Gods above, she wanted to go home.

"How's your leg?" The question startled her a second after it passed from her own lips, as though her body had physically responded to cope with her distressing thoughts.

The silence from within didn't help. Astrid winced. She opened her mouth to apologize.

"It's fine," Hiccup said. It sounded familiar. Like the same thing he said every time he was asked about it.

"Hiccup—"

Astrid cut herself off. Hackett and Ylva walked up the pathway, side-by-side. One of them would spot her soon enough.

"They're coming back," she said behind her.

"You going to greet them?"

"No."

"They're not that bad."

"I know that." And she did. "But…"

"She's not the best to you, I've noticed."

Astrid scratched her neck, looking to the side as Hackett and Ylva drew near. In a peek to monitor their progress, she caught Hackett's eye by accident and had no choice but to give a weak smile and half a wave. Hackett slowed. Ylva kept walking until she was no longer visible around the house; Astrid had no doubt that Ylva saw her and simply pretended not to.

A door opened—Ylva at the front, Astrid assumed, and a moment passed where Hackett glanced between the back of his wife and the bathhouse. He looked like he thought about going up to talk to her but, to Astrid's immense relief, he gave her a nod and disappeared to the front of the house.

Astrid heard the door shut. She waited a moment and then said, "They went in. I think."

More splashing and sloshing came from within.

"Hiccup?"

"Yeah?"

"You okay?"

He gave half a laugh. "Uh, yeah. I haven't drowned."

"Sorry. I was just saying they went in. I think."

"So they're gone?"
"Inside."

"Mind telling me what Ylva's problem with you is?"

"Not sure," she answered truthfully. "I think I'm just a nuisance to her."

She hadn't truly questioned it. There seemed to be some negative energy between them from the get go, and with Ylva's first mistreatment of her, Astrid jumped into the animosity. Maybe she had been looking for a fight, for some familiar release of frustration. She never cowered, or apologized, or tried to appease Ylva. She never tried to make anything right between them. It wasn't in her to.

More splashing came from within, but Astrid chose to focus on her problems with Ylva rather than try to imagine Hiccup's exact actions. She'd never told Hiccup about their physical altercations. It seemed stupid to bring up. He might hear it from village gossip eventually, but he wouldn't hear it from her, even when seeing Ylva give him a tight smile as she offered him more food left a sting in Astrid's chest.

The door opened, sooner than Astrid expected. Hiccup emerged, crutch underarm, with a towel on his head to soak the moisture from his hair. The sodden tips crept around his neck and curled against his jaw. Water darkened the edges of his shirt and it clung to the bones of his collar and chest so she could see his ribs.

The idiot was going to freeze because he couldn't dry himself properly.

Astrid stood and refrained from throwing her own, balled drying cloth at him, instead saying, "You don't need to rush on my account."

Hiccup pulled a face. His lips were blue. He glanced down at his body as though looking for some obvious sign of dirt.

"I didn't rush."

"You're still soaked."

His bewilderment turned into irritation. "I'm not soaked."

Astrid mirrored his expression and rolled her eyes skyward. He really did like to argue with everyone.

"Did that happen in the fire?"

"Hmm?"

Astrid looked down again to see Hiccup focused on something just left of her face. She realized she'd been tugging at the longer, loose strands rested against her right shoulder. Her hand came up to the focus of Hiccup's attention—the slightly bumped skin of her temple, no longer tender to the touch—and slid back to the chopped uneven strands.

"My hair?" she asked. "Yeah. I don't mind."

"I can… I can fix it for you," Hiccup said. Astrid stared at him and watched as the slight endearing smile melted off with her lingering silence. "I'm good with a knife," he added, looking down. "I mean, you are too, yeah, but you can't really see yourself or anything and I figured this would be easier."
"What are you talking about?" She was getting kind of hungry and standing outside after a bath had left a permanent chill in her skin. Hiccup talking nonsense quickened her ire. "How would you even fix it?"

Hiccup leaned on his good leg to look beyond her. Astrid turned too. No one stepped from the Hackett household. No one on the lower rungs looked their way. When she turned forward Hiccup was lightly stepping backwards into the open bathhouse, it's shadow draping across his face and shoulders like a cold cloak. He pulled his collar away from his chest and reached into his tunic with some difficulty.

Astrid snorted, "What—"

He came up with a knife.

Astrid swiftly walked inside and shut the door behind her, shutting out the Reefers. Shutting out the sun. "Where did you get that?" she hissed.

Hiccup grinned. "Forge."

"They're going to notice it's gone!"

The grin dimmed. "No they won't."

"It's your first day there and the first thing you do is steal this?"

"They won't notice."

Astrid made a noise of frustration, even as a part of her was duly impressed.

Hiccup went on, "They've got more weapons than they know what to do with. This is a half-repaired throwaway that I fixed up. It's not like it's a commission anyone's expecting or anything."

"Just... don't get caught with that." She sounded more petulant than cautionary. She couldn't help but wish for a blade of her own. She hadn't dared. Not with her meager clothing and the weird watchfulness she'd been treated with.

"So... do you want me to fix your hair?" He fidgeted, adjusting his weight on the crutch.

Astrid's hand flew back to her hair.

"You don't have to," she said with a hint of hesitance. She didn't like it, but it seemed like such a stupid thing to ever prioritize. She could live with it.

"You might feel better."

The strands slipped from her fingers. "Do I seem like I need something to make me feel better?"

"Well... yeah." His frankness helped. She felt her hesitance fade. It was just Hiccup, she told herself. Grizzled, crippled Hiccup, who's crushed foot she once poked around to semi-recreate.

Her renegade eyes fell to his stump before slipping to the side. "Okay."

Hiccup didn't acknowledge her brief stare, or perhaps he hadn't noticed. He stood, fingers tapping against the crutch, blade limp in hand, looking about the dim bathhouse. Astrid realized him being shorter than her would make for a difficult angle to cut. She considered just taking the knife from him and doing it herself, but her vanity dictated she'd much prefer something that wouldn't be a hackjob.
Something about having another Berkian see her like this, when the tension and desperation had bated, made her want to feel presentable.

"Here," she said, gesturing to the bench where drying cloths were piled. "I'll sit on the floor."

Hiccup hobbled forward. He set the crutch against the wall before limping toward the bench.

"You're getting better without that," Astrid commented.

"Thanks," Hiccup grunted. He pitched slightly when he made to push the cloths over and had to brace a fist against the wall. "Spoke too soon."

"Nah. You're doing great."

He said nothing as he settled on the bench. Astrid wondered if he took her comment as patronizing. She was learning not to acknowledge the leg if she could help it. That Hiccup would get sullen and tight-lipped and his pointed chin would shift forward if she brought up any mention of his progress in adjusting. A part of her found it entirely relatable. Another wondered if he would ever seek to talk about it.

"Ylva will kill me," she muttered, laying her own damp drying cloth on the ground in front of Hiccup's legs. He took the hint and moved his knees apart so she could kneel with the blades of her back tapping the benchwood, and Hiccup's bony knees knocking at her shoulders. 

"I'll help with laundry next time," Hiccup said. There was a tremor in his voice and Astrid only spent a second wondering why before she felt the heavier bulk of her hair being drawn over her shoulder by his fingers. She cheeks heated. 

Hiccup cleared his throat. "H-how do you… ahm. Do you want it just… like, cleaned up here?"

"What?"

"I can make it even. The right side. So it's not so… all over."

"Just make it all the same length as best you can," Astrid said. She was pleased to hear her own voice steady. No reason to make things tip into awkward territory.

"A-all of it?"

"Yeah." She couldn't think about it. About how long it might take her to have a braid again, to have hair her mother could play with or she could spend quiet moments before bed brushing and humming with the familiar, pleasing tingle to her scalp. She couldn't remember a time when her hair wasn't well below her shoulders—never letting it get too long for conspicuous weight, but always long enough to pull back.

But if a sense of normalcy meant short hair, so be it. It could be uniform, again. It could be a little less than an eyesore.

She felt him touch the sparser side of her left temple.

"Some of this is too short."

"That's fine."

"Is this length okay?" Astrid felt the light jerk at her scalp and saw Hiccup's fingers at her periphery, holding the split end of her half-burnt hair. "It's around your chin."
"Fine."

She wouldn't think about it. She'd probably have something like this done back home anyway.

Why not wait, then? She could. She didn't have to do this now.

Because, maybe, Hiccup was right. Maybe she needed something fresh and new to cheer her up. To feel a little more human. A little more like Astrid Hofferson the shieldmaiden and not Astrid Hofferson the shipwrecked survivor.

There was a slight calm that settled when someone touched her hair, the coolness along her scalp as strands were parted, the sensual pressure that came with every tug and pull. She tried not to think about who it was or the circumstances, even as his fingers raked the deformed side of her hairline.

"Does it hurt at all?"

"No," she answered. She knew immediately of what Hiccup referred to—probably the same as he would know when someone spoke of his leg. She knew she suffered burns to her temple and part of her scalp. They didn't recede back too far—instead sweeping south across her cheek and jaw and neck. Her hair probably protected her some, like thin mail to shield her head. Being thrown across dirt and rocks had probably helped put the smoldering out before it consumed even more of her hair.

She'd thought about it a lot in her first week of surviving; every detail of how she'd received every scar.

"I... I haven't really looked at it. What it looks like," she clarified. "I know it feels like it goes back a bit and I... I guess it affected my hairline didn't it?" It wasn't until she felt any semblance of safety that the vain thoughts trundled in. She couldn't help it.

"Mmm, a bit."

She felt his fingers at her neck, gathering her hair. More raked down, brushing what he had collected in his palm.

Then came the wrench.

"Did you sharpen this?" she asked.

"I did," Hiccup didn't sound annoyed, as she expected. "It's a little damp—your hair—and I don't think that's helping. Sorry."

"No. Keep going."

She strained back to keep her neck from jerking with the quick hew of his blade.

"They took—yours," she said, with grit teeth. It hurt. She knew Hiccup was trying to be gentle, but there was nothing gentle about sawing through hair. She should be so grateful that he sharpened it.

"They took my what?"

"Your dagger."

"Ah." A clump of hair fell by Astrid's foot. "Yeah, I noticed."

"I used it when I first...came to," she told him. "It was pretty useful."
Hiccup made a noncommittal noise. She felt him brush loose hair from her shoulders. Felt his fingers scrape the base of her skull as he grazed her hair straight.

It was dark, her damp hair left the back of her neck chilled. Goosebumps reached across her shoulders.

"Was it important to you?" The question felt meek as Astrid asked it, but it suddenly occurred to her that that tiny dagger might have had a story behind it, as most weapons did for a viking.

Hiccup had it for years. *Years.*

"What's more important," Hiccup said as he sliced through the next collection of hair, "is that it was useful to you."

"It was," her voice sounded quiet even in the silence of the bathhouse.

More hair rained around her hips. Some fell across Hiccup's thighs and his bare foot and pooled at the base of his peg.

"Will you tell me about that?" Hiccup asked. "That night."

"Maybe someday."

She didn't know how to talk about it. That horrifying, terror-filled night, and the further she lived from it the less she felt inclined to revisit that night.

Astrid winced at another tug to her scalp.

"Sorry," Hiccup murmured.

"My axe is still in the cove."

"Sorry," Hiccup said again. He actually sounded sorry—more sorry than causing her unintentional pain—which shocked Astrid more than anything.

"Are you?" she asked, to be sure.

"Well, I'm not sorry I took it from you. I'm sorry you were left... defenseless."

"I managed."

Would the axe have even helped? She recalled cursing Hiccup, wishing for her own blade and familiar grain against her palm... but in actuality she could barely move, barely lift Hiccup onto the raft. What good *would* her axe have been? Other than a much-needed comfort...

"Yes, you did," Hiccup murmured. She swore she could hear the smile in his voice, but when he next spoke it had dried. "It's my fault."

Though she knew what he inferred, she asked anyway. "What is?"

Hiccup worked his way towards the longer strands to her right. "This is. All of this—what you had to go through, alone. Without a weapon or, or help."

Clumps of dark blonde continued to curl around the base of Hiccup's peg leg like a twisted reminder of what they'd both lost.
"You mean if I hadn't followed you to the cove and started all this," she corrected, sweeping the scraps of her hair into a small pile. "If I hadn't been with you, forced you to… kidnap me, or whatever… you probably wouldn't have been at the nest. And if you were, you would have been faster. You and Toothless wouldn't be dragging around a third weight—"

"If you hadn't been with me, I'd be dead," Hiccup said shortly. He'd stopped cutting her hair. Astrid reached up to touch it. "I'm not done," he said in the same clipped tone. "I needed—" he stopped. The severity in his words fell soft, "I'm glad you were there. I'm just sorry you had to go through it all alone."

Astrid shrugged, nudging the inside of Hiccup's leg. "I knew you'd wake up."

"I don't think anyone did."

"Some people thought you'd wake up."

"I was baptized by the first person I saw outside."

Astrid smiled, knowing he couldn't see it.

"We killed the queen, though."

There was a reason this all happened. It wasn't about taking blame—that belonged to the dragon behind the war. It was about why it all happened. There was worth in their suffering, something Astrid hadn't fully appreciated until she sat at Hiccup's feet—foot—with his hands in her hair, alternating between uncomfortable tugs and soothing rakes.

Hiccup gave a short laugh. "I keep forgetting."

"I do too."

Odd, that.

"I'm almost done here."

"Thank the gods."

He scraped the underside of her jaw as he gathered the last of her long locks. He sawed. She strained her neck, wishing she could dust the prickling sensation from it. Instead she kept her hands busy playing in the castoffs at her sides.

Then, blessedly, the tugging stopped. She heard a dull clunk as Hiccup dropped the blade on the bench.

She felt his fingers all through her hair, straightening the strands, brushing out the tangles, measuring their new length. The tension in her neck eased. The gratifying tingle of earlier returned. It felt like a warm bath after a hard day—the very thing she'd been denied since she arrived on that island.

"Okay," Hiccup said, and his voice was as quiet as the room.

Astrid touched her neck first. If she tilted her head down it could be exposed. She brought both hands up and gathered as much hair as she could into a knot, the front strands fell away almost immediately. She let the rest go. She felt light and different. Alien. She twisted on the spot to face Hiccup.

"How's it look?" Insecurity leadened her voice, but she forgave herself. It was just Hiccup.
An expression passed over Hiccup's face that Astrid couldn't quite place. As though he were both happy and sad. "Great. It's," he cleared his throat, "it's not perfect, sorry, but it looks fine."

"Just fine?" she teased.

"Good. You look good. Of course."

"Thanks," she said, standing.

She half expected to keel over with the lightness. It would take some getting used to. It would take a lot of getting used to.

It would grow back. Someday.

Hiccup followed suit, moving more swiftly without the crutch than she'd seen before. "Yeah. No problem."

Her hair littered the floor in a thin film, with a nice little imprint of her seat left bare. Some were in great masses, as big as mice—

"Here."

Astrid turned. Hiccup had the crutch back under his arm and the knife that just cut her hair held out.

"Er... what do I need that for?" she asked even as she wiped a moist hand on her hip.

"Do you want it?"

Astrid took the blade; she took it before she even knew what to say. She spun it in her fingers, testing the weight as well as her own memory of blades. It felt a world different from anything her palm had practiced before, but it had a weight and security that she'd come to crave. She gripped the handle and soaked whatever comfort she could from it.

She wondered if she could ever get away with stashing it. Maybe somewhere deep in her hay pile (though, she wouldn't be surprised if that got searched every time she left the house). Maybe in her clothing like Hiccup—but hers didn't hang off her like his did.

Astrid flipped the dagger once and caught it by the blade, pinched between her thumb and forefinger, and handed it back to Hiccup. He stared at it. Then her.

She shrugged. "It's better if you have it."

Hiccup still didn't move.

"I feel like I'd be in less danger than you around here," he said. "You might—"

"That's exactly why you should take it," Astrid cut in. "They have a problem with me being around weapons. It could be because I'm more mobile."

"More intimidating," Hiccup listed. "More competent—"

"But if they catch me with a blade there'll be Hel to pay. You can get away with it. You can say you... found it. Or—"

"Accidentally forgot to put it away in the forge."
He said it with enough confidence that Astrid knew it would be what he told people.

"Yeah. Okay." It sounded weak but something told Astrid that Hiccup might just pull it off. He had a way of making anything seem like an accident.

He had a way of making people underestimate him.

Hiccup took back the blade.

"Well, if you ever want it, ever—"

"Yeah, I know." Astrid's hand froze as she ruffled the lighter, looser cut.

"Um, what do we tell them?"

"Them?"

"Hackett and Ylva."

Hiccup made a hilarious face and patted the blade close against his tunic.

"About… oh." His eyes went to where her hands played in the short, blonde strands. "Your hair."

"Yeah, my hair." Astrid couldn't decide if it felt nice or wrong. If it were a good kind of different or a bad different.

"Just tell them we stopped by the forge. Used a short-blade I'd been grinding."

Astrid grimaced. "Except, they saw me sitting out there when you were in the bath."

Hiccup cocked his head, eyes flitting to the door and back.

"With long hair?"

"Yeah."

He chewed his lip. Then shrugged. "Still works. We've been here for a while. We'll just say hair came up after and… yeah. We went to the forge."

"Or that I was waiting for you to finish so I could get you to cut my hair."

"Yeah, that does it." He glanced at the door again. The sun was dropping faster; they lost more and more light.

Astrid crouched down.

"Then we'll have to get rid of these if we want our story to pan out," she said. She began to scoop the remains of her hair into a pile, sweeping the bench and ground, patting down any cloths. Anything left behind could cost them a lie.

"Are you going to throw them all over the forge?" Hiccup asked.

"No, I can just toss them in the meadow uphill. Wind should catch them."

She missed Hiccup's nod as she ushered the collection of hair onto her drying cloth. It made quite the nest.
More than she initially thought, in fact.

"Wow," she muttered.

Maybe it hadn't had been necessary after all. Maybe she... maybe she shouldn't have...

"I think you've got it all." Hiccup was at the door. He creaked it open and peaked outside. A blast of orange radiated in; the last reach of the sun. "No one's around. I think we're good."

Astrid swallowed back the rising seed of regret. She wasn't going to get stupid over *hair*.

"Move a sec, so I can—okay, yeah, I think that's it." She ran her fingers across the ground, aiming to catch any stragglers. Satisfied, she stood, holding the memory of a girl who trained three times a day since she was seven—hair in every fashion of braid. It felt oddly heavy, like the weight on her shoulders now rested in her hands.

And she stood to throw it to the wind.

She took a breath.

"Insist that you re-grinded it. The blade, I mean. When we get back in there."

With amusement stark on his face, Hiccup said, "Because we can't have them thinking you'd been dulling their weapons with your hair."

"Well, it's the sort of thing I'd do. Inconsiderate bitch that I am."

Hiccup gave a startled laugh that brought a smile to her face.

"Hopefully it won't come to that line of questioning," he said, swinging the door the rest of the way open with an ease he certainly didn't have a couple days ago.

"Alright, let's scatter this and get back to the house." She patted the bottom of the cloth-turned-parcel, as though giving it one last weigh in.

"Hungry?" he asked.

Astrid's eyebrows rose. "Are you?"

"Yeah!" He grinned sheepishly at his enthusiastic response. His free hand went to his stomach.

"Good."

It was about time he worked up a normal appetite. The boy needed it.

Chapter End Notes

Big shoutout to Jenna-sais-pas for being a trooper and editing this beast of a chapter in weird chunks. Thank you!
Koma III

Chapter Summary

With Hiccup up and running, the teens make serious progress in getting off the island. They also seriously increase their chances of getting caught. Especially with recent communications in politics...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Astrid jolted awake.

Someone was nearby. She sensed it before her surroundings registered; it wasn't the first time she was awoken as such.

She knew there was movement. She realized that she had been stirred by the strange proximity. Then she looked around.

It was dark. Her eyes adjusted to soak in pale blue highlights cast across the room. Everything was higher—the bed to her right, the table beyond her feet, the hanging instruments across the room. She was on the ground. On her haystack. In the Hackett household. It was night. Cool in the wake of a humid day.

Hiccup. Hiccup woke her. She saw his short figure outlined in the faint lighting that crept under the doorway. He stood between her and the bed, his back to the cooking area.

"Hiccup?" she mumbled. Sleep clogged her throat. She wondered at the time—if she had accidentally gone to bed early or if it were the wee hours before Vikings rose for chores.

The air seemed to stiffen along with his shoulders. His figure gradually relaxed, softening, and shifted as he turned.

"You, er, want the bed?" his voice came as half a whisper.

Astrid blinked, brow furrowed.

"What—what time is it?" She squinted. Something jabbed in her side. She realized she had been sleeping on the knife Hiccup insisted she take.

That's right, she remembered. They went to bed at the same time. Hiccup told her to sleep with it. That it bothered him in the night.

It might have partaken in rousing her as well.

So why was he moving around now? They both went to bed at the same time. She saw him lay down and tuck in. Why was he...

Hiccup glanced behind him, then up, then shuffled closer to the bed, touching its mattress.
"I dunno. I—"

Astrid sat the rest of the way up. Her eyes were wide against the dark.

"Were you out with Toothless?" she asked. As soon as she said it she knew the answer. It wasn't dawn or dusk. It was the early morning hours when Viking slept soundest.

And she'd done it before herself.

Astrid felt a strike of annoyance that Hiccup would leave without telling her.

"Not initially…" came Hiccup's response.

Astrid swallowed. Was he lying to her as well?

"Hiccup..." They couldn't start lying to each other. They had to be a united front to counter the Reef Warriors. They were all each other had and the last thing they needed was to start dividing agendas.

The last thing she needed was to lose communication with her one Berkian ally.

A small fear had wormed its way into Astrid's heart ever since Hiccup first reunited with Toothless and it reawaked in that dark-lit room, with the straw stabbing her bottom and Hiccup hovering over his bed.

What if choices had to be made? Hiccup and Toothless would choose each other, always. If one of them, Odin forbid, had to stay behind, it would be her.

And Astrid knew it would be best, logically, tactically. She had both her legs and was a capable human. She would survive a little longer here.

But she didn't want to. She wanted to go home… probably more than Hiccup and Toothless combined.

"I was working on the—" Hiccup stopped talking. Astrid saw the outline of his face shift up and she knew he looked at the ceiling. He took a breath and continued. "At the—"

"Shhh!" Astrid shushed him.

She strained her ears as well. She didn't hear anything.

She didn't hear anything.

No snoring. No snuffling above.

Astrid forced herself to lie back down on the hay. She shuffled around as Hiccup hobbled the last two steps to his bed, hoping to drown out the peg that still sent a dull clunk along the wood despite Hiccup's efforts.

Astrid watched him remove the leg and set it at the floor before sliding under the covers.

She'd yell at him tomorrow.
“Hiccup!”

"Thor’s cu—nnfph!”

He teetered: too much weight went on his new leg, his arms grappled for the glossless cone of metal he’d been hammering against. He hung, for a breath, in humorous suspension before he managed to shift his weight enough to stumble forward and get his other foot back under him.

Hiccup, with his hands braced against the anvil and his shoulders tight, turned. He spotted Astrid peaking from the northern-most post upholding the forge roof.

He wore the long, loose expression of bewilderment.

"Wha—uh—what are you doing?” he asked, looking every-which-way. "Here? Where did—how long—"

He kept switching between her and the other side of the open-faced forge, where a hearth fired brightly.

Astrid wasn't worried about unexpected guests as the only person beyond Hiccup—the robust, smithy woman—had left seconds before. She'd been watching.

Keeping her body pressed to the post she shielded herself with, Astrid hissed, "Did you really think I would let you off the hook?"

Hiccup continued to squint at her as though she were being completely unreasonable.

"Aren't you supposed to be with Fisk?" he challenged.

Astrid shrugged and moved around the post so that she could lean her back against it. She had crouched long enough, waiting until Hiccup was alone. Her knees ached.

"'Told him I was going to the outhouse.” She needed to get away from that wharf was more like it. Some days the smell got to her. Some days she needed a break from Fisk’s endless chatter, especially when she couldn't focus on what he said with a mind too occupied by last night's events.

"And he let you?” Hiccup continued to sound incredulous. He returned to his hammering, glancing at the other end of the forge; every time he lifted the tool he'd turn his neck.

It was some sort of sheet metal. A guard, if Astrid were to guess, warped by battle or accident.

Astrid stood her ground and snorted. "I could tell him I wanted to take a walk in the woods and he'd probably let me—and don't change the subject!"

"What's the subject?"

Hiccup moved to a series of tiny, rapid taps against the finer dents near the head. He had his head turned to keep one ear towards her, eyes darting up every now and then for the Smith, but his precision was spot on.

Astrid leaned over her crossed arms. "Last night. Did you see—" the hair on the back of her neck stood, "—erm—Tee?"

She couldn't bring herself to say Toothless's name out loud.

All it would take was one person she didn't notice—one Viking who overheard her speak about
"seeing someone" and everything could come rushing down around them. Just the other day she hadn't noticed Lefsi.

"I—" Hiccup took a breath, eyes fixed on the hearth's bend. He ceased his hammering only to twist his neck around for a full scope of his surroundings before he ducked his head and carried on—light and fast with his tool. "Yes," he said. "But not at first. I came here."

"Here?" Astrid reiterated, finger jabbed at the ground. "This place?"

"Yeah," Hiccup said, and he set the hammer down. "Ready for this?"

He limped three paces to the nearest wall and bent, drawing back a curtain nailed about hip high that Astrid quickly learned was used to hide a scrap cubby. She saw lengths of splintered wood and rusted metal, a shoddy bin of fixtures and dulled tools tucked into the corner, cobwebs and powdery dust coating its edges.

Hiccup reached in (Astrid sincerely hoped he wouldn't nick himself lest he be poisoned by bad metal) and withdrew twin metal rods, near identical in width and shape, each about the length of his arm. The metal was discolored, patterned

"What…" Astrid started, leaning closer to get a better look, but Hiccup tucked the rods back.

"The start of a skeleton," he said brightly. He had all his weight on his good leg and he pushed himself up with a discomforted grunt, but Astrid couldn't bring herself to be affected by anything but the new project.

"For the…"

"Tail," he said quickly. "Yeah."

Astrid thought his limp might have been worse on his way back to the anvil. Hiccup picked up his hammering; a new sound screen to mute the carry of their voices.

"In the night?"

Hiccup gave his bottom lip a quick chew and nodded. "It's not like at, at home. I can't really use the forge... I can't light it up, or… it sucks. I have to find parts that don't need much forging. I was lucky with those two—basically perfect blanks—but I'll need at least two more. It's so slow. I need to muffle the tools with cloth, and stay low, and sometimes the hearth is still hot enough to get some use out of it. It's lucky it's so windy, but Irpa still might hear—"

"Did anyone see you?" Astrid interrupted. She had left the post; at some point her weight had gone to both her feet and she stood at Hiccup's side. She'd taken up the covert watch of their surroundings, as Hiccup seemed too distracted in his ramblings to bother.

He seemed startled by her proximity.

"Grolli is just around the corner," Hiccup warned her. "She could come back—"

"I know. Did anyone see you?"

"I don't think so."

"Hiccup!"

Unapologetic, he grumped, "How else am I going to get anything done?"
"During the day when you're alone, I would imagine," Astrid replied, though she found she couldn't truly fault him. She was more bothered by the thought that if Hiccup got caught being fishy then they would be kept on an even tighter leash, making it that much more difficult to move around towards Toothless. A new tailfin was exactly what they needed but Hiccup could send them ten paces backwards with the way he handled things.

It also irked her that he hadn't told her what he'd been planning.

"I'm rarely alone," Hiccup pointed out what she already knew. "And it won't be for long. I could... I could manage something in a few days... if I go out every night."

Astrid shook her head. "They'll notice. Hackett and... they probably noticed last night." It had been so unnaturally quiet upstairs. "They'll be vigilant."

"So every other night."

"And they have night patrol."

"For dragons."

"And Hooligans."

Hiccup lowered the hammer and looked at her. "What?"

"They caught me visiting Tee once."

"They caught me visiting Tee once."

He set the hammer down, turning fully. "What?"

"No, no, they didn't—it's not—" She looked around again and took a small breath. "I was just outside Hackett's. I wasn't anywhere near Tee. I said I was going to the bathroom." It occurred to Astrid that she should change up her excuses a bit lest they thought she had a bladder infection. "But someone must have told Hackett because he made a comment about not wandering around the next day... I'm just saying: if one person sees you, they all see you. This isn't Berk, where people expect you to be clinking around in the forge at ungodly hours."

"Like you," Hiccup supplied.

"I... what?"

"Remember?" Hiccup asked with a grin that made Astrid wonder if he'd absorbed any of her caution. "A while back, at Ber-uh-home, when you found me in the forge and said I was... what was it? Being weirdier?"

Astrid turned her head thoughtfully. The words rung something familiar... "Oh. Oh, back in training. Yeah..." An image of Hiccup being jerked against the shop windows came. Rising unnaturally. The hour, late. "Yeah... wait, what happened then?"

Hiccup struck the metal a few times, his smile fond. "Tooth—uh, Tee was in there. I got my harness caught to his saddle and I had to drag him into the village."

Astrid tore her eyes away from the shoulder-guard Hiccup tinkered.

"You brought... him into the village?"

"Yeah, said 'hi' to Hoark and everything," Hiccup chuckled. "Tee's pretty good at blending into the night."
Astrid was sure her face said it all. "I've noticed," she deadpanned.

Hiccup paused to shake a cramp from the hand that held the guard steady. Astrid thought his glove might go flying off with the thinness of his wrist.

"Anyway," he said, "He was right behind me when you walked up. Saw a sheep and went after it —"

"That's what pulled you away?" The loudness of her own voice shocked her. Astrid shrunk back to the post and added, quieter. "I thought it was some hair-brained experiment."

"Nope," Hiccup chuckled. "Just a dr-dragon," he whispered. "Who showed up, by the way," he went on, voice rising. "Last night. That's the second part. He came around this way—" He waved his hammer from the eastern forest, arched well over the third rung, beyond Hackett's, and gestured to the smaller cluster of trees near Irpa's home. Nearly directly north of the forge, "to see me. It's like he knows where I am at all times…"

"Doesn't he?"

Hiccup smiled down at his assignment. "Yeah," he said, and Astrid knew it wasn't just hard, familiar labor that had brought life into him.

An uncommon sting of sadness netted her chest, like a cluster from a coughing sickness. Toothless had his preferred human back, and for the first time Astrid felt like the part of a team that had been bumped to the third wheel. Uninvited. The tag-along. She'd never felt this before, never had to deal with a silly, muted sort of hurt that no amount of logic could soothe.

She watched Hiccup work for a moment, looking focused and content. With a heavy stomach, Astrid realized she couldn't stop him. Not from sneaking out. Not from seeing Toothless or Toothless seeing him. Not if they were determined.

And she definitely couldn't visit Toothless anymore. Not that she made a dangerous habit of it but… Hiccup was the one Toothless wanted to see, and if one of them were sneaking out at night it now had to be Hiccup. It made more sense. She had no right, no claim to… it was fine. Fine.

An unaccountable urge to clear her throat came over her, and with a small cough, Astrid asked, "So did you get the right measurements? If you had his tailfin there?"

Hiccup had returned to his hammer-and-scout routine. "Kinda, yeah. I don't have all the tools really —this isn't my forge—but I eyeballed the two longest rods and I have a decent grasp of the short ones. Spacing too, that was the hardest part the last time. It's good I had his tail. Really good. The hardest part in all of this is going to be rigging, but the tail part I could get done in a few days if I keep tapping away at it."

Funny, as he tapped away at someone's shoulder guard.

Astrid brushed her hair behind both her ears. "You still going to try night then?"

"Yeah. I mean, I'll do what I can now, or whenever," he added, in what Astrid suspected to be to her benefit, "but… night's when I do my best work sometimes." Hiccup had managed to build up a shine to his face that Astrid was sure hadn't been there when she first arrived. It left his hair clumpy and hanging over his eyes, his cheeks a bit ruddy. He looked healthier than she could last remember him. "I can get a lot more done. I think better. You know? No one's around or...or watching or in the way."
"Not really," Astrid said, dry. She was more of a morning person herself. She needed a head start on the day to feel like she's done anything productive and a full night's rest at the end. She tried harder when people watched. "Why didn't you tell me? That you were going to work on it."

Somehow, inconceivably, knowing why Hiccup did it mattered more to Astrid than what he did. How hard could it have been to let her know?

Hiccup shot her a look. She could see the pull of his brow even from her angle at the post.

"I… didn't really think about it," he admitted. He didn't look at her, instead opting to lift the shoulder guard for a show of observation, running his fingers over the bending, with too much focus on a chink near the neck he couldn't quite smooth.

He hadn't, Astrid realized. It hurt.

She pushed it back. The hurt and the spark of anger that made her want to stand fully in that forge and tell him exactly what she thought of his inconsideration. That they were all each other had, that he and Toothless were all she had, and she couldn't be left out. She had to be worked with, not worked around. She had to be thought of.

With her shoulder pressed against the wooden post and her eyes trained on the sparsely populated pathways, Astrid said in a low, measured tone. "Hiccup, we need to communicate, even if it's dangerous. You can't… you can't leave me in the dark."

Not after everything she'd done to keep him around.

"I'm sorry." The hammering had stopped again. When Astrid took her gaze from the observation back onto him she found Hiccup squared. His chest heaved with the effort of his work. Pieces of his too-loose tunic clung to his torso. She thought she might see the outline of the blade in his tunic against his stomach and worried that others might notice it as well.

"I'm sorry," he repeated. His hand came up to brush his hair back; blackened fingers raked through his bangs to leave them cocked and tangled but free from his eyes. "I'm not—I guess I'm not used to, to," he waved his hand enigmatically between them. "This."

She blinked. "This?"

"Us."

"Us?"

He wasn't buying into her playful calling. "Working with someone," he stressed. "Telling someone everything—or what I plan on doing. I've never… I've… I just don't… do things like that."

"We have to now," Astrid informed him. It wasn't up for negotiation as far as she was concerned. "With our situation. It's important—"

"I know," he cut in. He seemed frustrated. Angry, even, though she couldn't tell if it was towards her or himself. "I get it. I'm sorry. I won't—I'll try, okay?"

"Yes, try," Astrid relented. She paused, squinting at the way Hiccup leaned against the anvil. "I thought you said they had you sitting at this job?"

The flush in his cheeks might've had other causes.
Hiccup ignored her. "Anyway, think you can get some canvas for me?" he muttered out the side of his mouth as he brought the hammer back up and down again. He seemed aggrieved by the single chink he couldn't smooth out. Astrid had to admit—he caused relatively good force for someone who looked like they could be blown over by a sea breeze.

Her arms crossed. "And where do you think I'll get it? Off one of Fisk's sails?"

Hiccup set the hammer down. He wiped the sweat from his upper lip and said, "Esbjorn will get it if you give him this."

Then he reached into his tunic—his laughably, horribly, loose tunic—pulling down to show off pale, freckled skin and ribs and a few stray red hairs that thickened downward. The action was so familiar from their bath night that Astrid half.expected him to emerge with another dagger. Astrid almost asked him how many things he kept in that potato sack he called clothing when he withdrew what she first thought was a wonky, misshapen toggle.

"What?"

She marched closer.

Hiccup sent a quick look of alarm over his shoulder toward the forge entrance. "Astrid, don't—"

"Hiccup," she interrupted, coming into full view within the forge, "explain this to me."

Glancing towards the hearth again, hip pressed against the anvil, Hiccup handed Astrid a rather intricate looking block of wood. She took it. It was smoother than she'd anticipated, and light to hold, not much longer than the length of her hand. The horizontal folds represented robes and it had a clear oval face with soft, subtle, barely-feminine features—an expression of serenity if Astrid were to squint. Or sleeping. It's glossy shine and astringent smell told Astrid Hiccup must have taken some oil from the forge recently.

"It's Freya," Hiccup said needlessly, and as soon as he said it Astrid understood. She remembered the eclectic figurines lining Esbjorn's forge. His pushy prayers and wild, religious hand-gestures.

"You did this?"

Hiccup hummed an affirmative and shuffled away from her, leaning every which way to make sure they were still alone.

"Over the past few days," he said. "I had been using things in Ylva's place whenever she wasn't around and I was supposed to be resting."

"You were," Astrid interrupted. "Supposed to be resting."

"It was firewood from outside—"

"That I'd cut."

"—I'd been using tools Ylva left around. But that knife from here came in handy."

"Do you sleep?" Astrid asked, completely serious. Perhaps it wasn't the amputation that caused Hiccup's day sleeping. Maybe he worked on a completely different schedule than a normal Viking.

"Every other day."

He said it so seriously she might have worried, but Hiccup returned to the anvil and readjusted the
hammer in his grip. "Just get me a good length of leather so I have something for this skeleton."

Astrid found herself nodding. A part of her had missed giving up control to someone else. A part of her welcomed the instruction.

She headed out the forge, Freya clutched in her hand, palms sweaty with oil and nerves, the steady drum of metal following her into the heart of the village.

Canvas. Skeleton rods. They were doing it—making progress in getting all three of them off that island—and it came with a terrible sort of exhilaration.

"What'd you do to your hair?"

Esbjorn's question was sprung on Astrid before she fully spotted him sitting on his overturned bucket. He pinched a large needle between a finger and thumb with an attached tail of filmy cloth zig-zagged between two pads of leather.

Astrid's mouth shut to whatever greeting she had planned and ignored the question.

"Can I have some canvas?" she said, abrupt, and stuck out the wooden piece. "I'll trade you."

Esbjorn's small, dark eyes dropped from her hair to the figure. She paid special attention to the way his fleshy cheeks lifted and closed around his squint. How his jaw shifted and his bottom lip rose.

He pushed up to his feet and hobbled over in a way that made Astrid instantly think of Hiccup. A short-fingered hand reached for the figurine she offered and snatched it. Astrid palm was left sweaty, slick from undried oil, and she hastily wiped it along her hip.

Her eyes lifted to the rows of icons as Esbjorn inspected the offering, flipping it in his hand, dipping it to test its weight. Most were larger than what he held, some painted—gaudy even—but Astrid thought it would fit on the shelf nicely.

"Yeh steal this?"

Astrid's head whipped around.

"Wuh—no!" she flared. She didn't know whether to feel bemused or angry. She hadn't been accused of theft since she was eight and Jörburn the baker had three cakes go missing. No one who knew her now would dare—

"How much?" Esbjorn asked, tapping Freya's tiny, simple face with a sharp, clean nail.

Astrid blinked down at him.

"How much...?"

"Leather, fool girl."

Shit.

"Um..." She had no Midgardian idea.
Damn it, Hiccup.

"How about..." she stalled. *How big was Toothless' tailfin?* Her hands lifted in the air, spreading, trying to measure the width and height she recalled Toothless' good tail-half as.

*But Hiccup would need more than that, wouldn't he? For error? Maybe twice the length, if he actually folded it over the rods...*

Feeling rather thick, her hands spread a bit further.

Gods, she had *no* idea how he built that tailfin. She hadn't the time to observe the original, and when she did it had been little more than wreckage.

Astrid motioned to something near the length of her arm span—guesswork of the tailfin plus an additional half—and prayed to the dozens of tiny gods brooding overhead that it would be enough.

Esbjorn grunted, eyes circling the empty space Astrid tried to gesture.

He gave the Freya figure a small toss. "You think *this*'ll pay for *that* much?"

A spark of defense towards Hiccup rose as quickly as her ire for him drained. Astrid thought it was a rather nice carving.

"How much do *you* think it'll pay for?" she bit.

"Not that much," Esbjorn pushed back. "Do you know what kind of work is involved with making a slab of leather that big?"

"Yes." Sort of. Her parents owned more than a family's worth of sheep and, even if most of her chores had been constrained to shearing and livestock care, she had a basic understanding of what happened to the ones eventually butchered.

Esbjorn's stout face lined with a scowl. He shook the figure. "Then you know there should be some labor on top of it."

Astrid thought she understood, and some of the crunch she felt over payment released.

"Do you...want me to help out around here?"

Esbjorn was nodding before she finished the question.

"Yes, yes. I could use some'un with good strong legs. You got good strong legs, girly?"

Astrid took a slow breath, then stopped, catching the fumes of the tanning solution too early. She swallowed and nodded.

"Good," Esbjorn said. He walked about his shop holding the little Freya overhead, glaring through one eye as though imagining which companions would be best for her. "Hunting's started, trade's about to, and I've got my usual hands running off on me this time'a year."

Astrid wiped her dry palms against her tunic. The time pressed on her.

"Alright," she said quickly, "give me the leather now and you'll have me for tomorrow."

Esbjorn finally lowered Freya and looked at Astrid. Shadows pronounced his low, flat brow. The overhead sun reflected off an unlidded soaking barrel, glaring an oily sheen over his short ponytail.
“Suppose that'll do. Hope you don't mind smelling like lime.” He cackled as he shuffled to one of his ceiling racks. He kicked his bucket-seat along with him like it was no more than a bashyball and, when he leveled underneath a thin, rather pale plane of hanging hide, stepped up on it to loosen it from its line. "Understand, missy, that this is for something that can't be paid for at the moment. Take too long to pay, lose your stay. You hear?" He handed her the leather, full face looking harsh when it might otherwise be jovial. "You'll finish paying though, won't you lass? Wouldn't lie before the eyes of the gods, would yeh?"

"I'll be here tomorrow," Astrid said again, without reining any of her snipe.

Esbjorn finger went from wagging at his display of worship figurines to wagging at her.

"Or Hel herself will come for yeh. I'll pray for that much."

"Nice," Astrid grumbled, rolling the leather around her arms and tucking it against her stomach as inconspicuously as she could. Hel had already come for her once; didn't he know that?

"Tomorrow," Esbjorn reminded her as she hurried back up the stony paths to the forge.

Astrid didn't respond, irritated with the strange, stout man and a fighting down a rapidly beating heart that couldn't quite let her celebrate grabbing the material they so desperately needed to get off that island.

Hiccup's express surprise upon being presented with the leather so quickly nearly made Astrid's promise to work in the tannery tomorrow with that fat, raving nut worth it.

He took the rolled material from her quickly, keeping it down by his hip as he palmed through it—testing its weight or thickness or length without unrolling it; Astrid wasn't sure.

"Wow, Astrid." He ran a hand through his hair, giving the back of his head a quick scratch. "I mean, I knew you could get it, but… wait, did you threaten him?"

"No," Astrid said, more amused than offended.

"That's—this is great." He gave her a big, dopey smile like she had accomplished something wonderful and Astrid's amusement took a turn for bemused. She might have felt patronized if he allowed her the time to analyze the weird reaction, but Hiccup was already shuffling things around down in the cubby where he stored the rods, buried within half-finished non-essentials.

"With some luck and some time I could have this cut and out of the way by tomorrow," he said, piling a couple old boards overtop the leather. "Grolli's not back yet and if she's gone this long tomorrow I could make some real progress."

It was lucky. Astrid had been lucky. Lucky that Grolli hadn't returned yet and lucky that no one took real notice of her as she scurried back to the forge. It was high noon and most people were at the village square or in for a mid-meal, and the path upwards to the smithy was mostly farm houses and quiet. She had kept the bundle pressed to her stomach, arms wrapped around the slick leather, and tried to keep her steps quick but not too quick.

It was that damnable, precarious steeple of luck that she could never let herself feel comfortable on.
She had to assume someone had seen her, someone had wondered what she was doing. That someone would tell Hackett. That Esbjorn would bring it up, at least.

Instead of cautioning Hiccup to pace himself with his project, as she first intended, she asked, "What will we tell people? About the leather? We can't rely on Esbjorn to keep his mouth shut."

"That I wanted some leather to pad my prosthesis," Hiccup said. He gripped the top of the cubby and lifted himself heavily. His body stood straight but Astrid could tell most of his weight went to his right leg.

Swallowing the need to tell him to use his Thor-forsaken crutch, she remarked, "That's quite a bit of leather for a cushion."

Hiccup shrugged and flashed a quick grin. "So I'm new at it."

He had a lame excuse for everything, didn't he?

"Well," she said. "I did look pretty stupid when he asked how much leather I needed as I didn't have an answer for him." And the stare Astrid leveled on Hiccup, she hoped, was enough to shame him for the moment of embarrassment he caused her. "At least you can say you never needed that much to begin with."

He looked mildly apologetic more than shamed.

"Heh, sorry. Yeah, as soon as you left I started thinking… well, you did good. Well. You did well. It's perfect, really. And I'll use some of the scraps to do just that, for my leg. The padding. For proof, ya know."

Astrid nodded. She rested her hip against the half-wall she leaned against. "And are you? Making yourself a new prosthesis, I mean. You said that's why you wanted to work in the forge."

"I am, yeah. Actually… I mean, since you want to know everything I do—" Astrid couldn't tell if it was snark over her expressing her displeasure at his covert behaviors, but he kept talking before she could comment. "I'm going purposefully slow. I think I'm going to downplay what I can do. In case they only let me in the forge for just that time, you know? Like if I made a prosthesis and then they brought me up to Irpa right after. I could keep working at night here, I guess, but that would make getting caught that much more dangerous—"

"So you're going to slowly make a leg and use all your free time for the tail," Astrid interjected before he rambled away all of their privacy.

"Yeah," Hiccup said, looking over his shoulder. "I just have to plan it right. With the cutting and the skeleton… and the rigging, too. It's frustrating when I think about it. Like… like fighting with a hand tied behind my back. Or both hands and having to use my teeth."

Astrid didn't know what she could do to help other than keep the Reefers off his back and buy him time and materials. And some positivity.

"You said the rigging would be the hardest part, and the leather cuts shouldn't take much time."

"Yeah," Hiccup agreed. And then again, slower, as though waking from a fervid dream, "Yeah… that's… well, we're going to have to get creative to make a whole rigging without drawing any attention. Damn, it's gonna be… yeah. Damn."

He understood the complexity of their situation. Astrid could see it in the way his eyes lost focus, and
the draw of his face, and the jimmy in his leg. She couldn't always tell with him—if he truly comprehended how delicate they had to be—but he was stressed too. Only it came in bouts; flashes of anxiety he'd quickly distract himself from.

His worry, funny, alleviated some of her own.

"You did it on Berk," Astrid added, feeling as unhelpful as she sounded.

Hiccup sent her a quick, flat look and turned the shoulder guard he fiddled with in his hands. "Like you said: this isn't Berk."

"Yeah…" Astrid unintentionally mimicked Hiccup. Her happiness over acquiring the leather had nearly vanished. She shook her head. "One thing at a time, okay? I'm working in the tannery tomorrow so if you need anything else, let me know."

She could have told him it was because the figurine wasn't enough but she didn't think that would do anything constructive. What was done was done.

"Does Hackett know you're working there?" he asked, surprised.

"No, but he'll let me."

Right? What reason would Hackett have against her working in the tannery?

"The same way Fisk will let you? Also," Hiccup added, a bit more tentatively, "This is going to be known as the longest bathroom break in the history of bathroom breaks…"

A terrible feeling of ‘oh shit’ swept a cold chill down Astrid's neck before the smell of the forge hit her, the heat of its fire, and she felt the stiffness release from her shoulders.

"I just… I went to say 'hi' to you," she shrugged. "Nothing wrong with that."

She could almost make herself believe it.

"Oh, sure," Hiccup scoffed. "They'll totally believe you-what, with their suspicion towards anything not logged on their schedule for us."

"They'll have to," Astrid said promptly. "Here comes our witness." And she cocked her head to the side with an almost elastic grin as Grolli, the heavy-set smith of the Reef Warriors, stomped uphill to the forge's front entrance.

The woman's brow rose upon spotting Astrid, but nothing wary or malign showed in her surprise.

"'Lo there, lass," she said as she stepped under the roof's shade. Her hands were empty and her hips jingled with coin.

"Hi," Astrid greeted. It felt like her eyes wouldn't match the smile on her face, but the result was a muted sort of greeting, which she supposed trumped desperate-manic any day.

Grolli had always been indifferent towards her, as had her husband, Sod. That didn't stop Astrid's heart from thudding in her throat.

"Did Fisk send you up here?" Grolli asked. She moved with a solid grace Astrid hadn't seen of Hiccup or Gobber. Weaving around her forge on powerful legs like it was a familiar homestead, shoulders never teetering.
"Oh, no," Astrid said as mildly she could. "I just came to see how Hiccup's doing. He's not on his leg too much, is he?"

Grolli's thick, brown eyebrows rose. She glanced to a shuffling Hiccup and back to Astrid. "He don't have to be on it at all, if he don't want. I didn't tell him to stand."

Astrid started a backward walk, away from the shop window she leaned on. Hiccup gave her a helpless shrug.

"Like I said, just checking in," Astrid said before Hiccup could make any comment about why he stood. "Take it easy on him."

She turned, remembering Hiccup shifting between sheepish and indignant and Grolli's narrowed, confused turn of her head.

Her stomach was in knots as she returned to the job she had all but abandoned. Her throat felt tight. Her cheeks hot and her fingers cold. She wondered if they had taken five steps forward or three back.

"Hiccup...?"

It was the second time in two nights Astrid found herself wondering at the hour.

She blinked against the darkness, her body stiff and tight. Her ears quickly found focus on the moaning. The gasping. The 'kahs' and 'gods'.

She sat. Then found the source.

"Hiccup!" she whispered again, harsher, louder. She scrambled off the hay.

His body writhed; furs kicked down as he tossed and turned.

Before she reached the bedside he was awake—flying to a sit, a booming gasp inflating his chest, shuddering in his throat. It expelled with an audible whimper as he lurched forward, curling over his leg. His knee lifted and the blankets fell back further. He gripped his stump, shaking. A long moan rose from his throat and forced its way through clenched teeth.

"Hiccup, what—"

"I'm fine," he breathed, eyes screwed shut. "I'm fine, I'm—" He cut off, wincing again, a nasally mewl at the back of his throat. A moment of silence stretched where Hiccup's short, sharp breaths drummed against the dark.

Astrid found herself rubbing his shoulder. Then his back. She could still feel the bones stark against her hand.

She couldn't tell if he stiffened from pain or her touch. He continued to mumble, "This... it's okay. I'm okay. I'm-I'm...just...a minute." He continued to rock over his leg, arms stiff, hands bracing.

His back was damp and it took Astrid only a moment to realize it was sweat. He rested his forehead against his knee and breathed deeply. His spine sharpened with the motion.
Astrid's fingers curled at the collar of his tunic where her nails pressed against risen scar tissue. The heel of her palm rubbed a circular pattern in the space between his shoulder blades. His skin was hot, cooling.

"What...what can I do?" she asked. She'd get him water if he wanted. Or a damp towel. Or...or a hug, she supposed. She didn't know. She didn't know what to do.

"Nothing," Hiccup said, tightly. "It was just..."

"A nightmare?"

"Or a memory. I don't know."

Astrid's hand stilled. The possibility of Hiccup becoming conscious on the island while she gathered supplies, or during the removal of his leg, had never occurred to her. It did then. The thought of Hiccup waking as they took a blade to his shin came. Him lying in the smoldering remains of the Red Death, alone, skin cracked with burns, his foot destroyed. Utterly flattened.

She leaned closer, wrapping her arm around his back so she held his other shoulder.

"Gods, Hiccup. Did you ever—"

"Can we switch?" He turned his head, looking at her.

Her brow lowered. "Switch?"

She felt his ribs lift and fall with another breath. "I can't be here. On the bed. I can't...can I have the hay?"

Astrid hesitated. Hiccup had had sleeping fits before, but this was the first he'd had since he woke from his coma. The first she knew of, anyway.

"You... You should be comfortable after that," she wanted to say. "I don't think you want the hay."

"Please," he croaked. "Take the bed. You should have it for a while anyway. I can't be here anymore. I need to—I-I'll sleep on the floor, if you don't—"

A wooden groan sounded from the floor above.

"Okay, okay," Astrid whispered quickly.

"Thank you," Hiccup breathed. He pulled away from her hand, shifting out from the furs.

Astrid sat back on her heels, watching as he half-hopped, half-crawled to the hay pile. He left his prosthesis on the floor by the bed, his crutch against the wall.

She bit her lip. A horrible combination of guilt and helplessness drove whatever drowsiness lingered from mind. She couldn't imagine sleeping.

"The knife's in there," she whispered. "Just near the top, buried."

"Right, thanks."

"Is...is there anything else? Do you need a drink? Or Irpa?"

"No," Hiccup said, rustling the bedding as he curled his body. "I'm fine. Thank you."
He closed his eyes and said nothing more.

The morning hadn't started out well. Not with Ylva's waspish reaction to seeing Astrid in the bed and Hiccup on the hay. The conversation had only gone downhill from there.

"First the hair and now this? They're up to something, Hack!"

"Ylva…"

"How are we up to something?" Astrid cut in, stepping around the reach of Hackett's broad back so she could face Ylva dead on. "What's wrong with me wanting to fix my hair?"

It had been three days out now and Astrid had been waiting for another comment beyond 'What have you done to yourself?'

Ylva kept a hard grip on the hilt of her spear, her other hand rested on a thick hip. "Any one of us could have done it—"

"I wouldn't trust any of you near my head with a blade!" Astrid tried to keep her voice down. She tried not to let her anger get the better of her and shout down at Ylva how she truly wanted to shout at her; she never forgot how Hackett warned her to respect his wife under his roof—and here he stood, to her left, arms crossed.

"Easy, both of you," Hackett ordered.

Ylva ignored him. "And you think you're going to shirk poor Fisk and do whatever you please; working where you want, dropping responsibilities!"

"I'm not—" Astrid stopped herself from announcing how displeased she would be to work in the tannery with the oils and smells; anything she said could be weaponized against her. "Esbjorn asked me, so I said sure."

"Grolli was there!" Hiccup piped up, stepping shoulder-to-shoulder with Astrid. "At the forge."

Astrid sent him a grateful smile. "She was."

"Grolli said she left you for a while and when she came back Astrid was there," Hackett said. He didn't sound accusatory like his wife, but Astrid felt her stomach drop with the notion that he had been checking up on stories. Or that he was being reported to.

If Hackett really wanted to dig around he would find out everything. Maybe he knew more than he let on. She had to assume so.

"You're not going to the forge today," Ylva barked at Hiccup. Astrid wondered if whatever tentative bond they had had snapped, and if she were partially responsible.

To his credit, Hiccup didn't lash out. Astrid could almost feel the tremor of his restraint beside her.

"Why?" he asked with force calm. His voice sounded weak.

"You're going to Irpa's," Ylva said just as strident. In the next instant, she whirled on both Astrid and
Hackett, finger rigid and wagging. "I told you he wasn't ready to be out there working, especially with something like forge work. Honestly, yer both a pair of fool-born toggleheads! Allowing that sort of rash, foolish..."

Hackett, to his credit, seemed to relax from whatever tension had built that morning.

"… and you making him sleep on the hay…"

"I made her switch," Hiccup interjected quickly. "It's not fair to her…"

Astrid's next smile came weaker. Hiccup had insisted that she take the bed last night and, given his post-nightmare condition, she accepted. Now, in the light of day, she regretted it.

Hiccup looked wane—nothing like the day before in the forge when he was flushed with life and the memory of seeing Toothless. His frailty was apparent, with his discomfort and clamped jaw, and Astrid cursed herself for not noticing it either. He had certainly gone out again last night. Perhaps it was the constant stress on his leg that incited the phantom pains.

"I can take him to Irpa's," Astrid said. She might even carry him.

"No."

It wasn't Ylva, as Astrid would have assumed, but Hackett. He gave his wife's arm a quick rub.

"Ylva, love, you can take him."

"I can take myself," Hiccup interrupted. He had the sort of glower that might have been frightening on a man twice his age, but on Hiccup's pouty cheeks and thin body, did little more than make Astrid feel a sting of fond exasperation.

"We know," Ylva inflected, "but I have to go up there anyway. We can go together."

Hiccup opened his mouth, paused, then shut it. Astrid felt the matter settle like a physical weight.

"As for you," Hackett said, turning to Astrid. "Esbjorn is expecting you and I gotta get to the wharf. Ready?"

"Ah-um, yeah."

It all happened rather quickly. One moment things were tense over a breakfast of dried meat and honey bread and the next they were scheduled for the day, all arguments laid to rest. Astrid hadn't the time to exchange any looks with Hiccup before Hackett was beckoning her to follow him outside and down the hill to the second rung. She followed, swallowing the last mouthful of water in her cup and thumbing the crumbs off her mouth.

"Esbjorn wants you in his outer shop," Hackett informed her. "So it's right on the way."

Astrid grimaced, though she couldn't say she was surprised. Esbjorn's center shop handled all the finer work of hides as well as his sales and trades. On the outskirts of the village, the eastern edge of the first rung, sat Esbjorn and Gerd's second station—or, rather, first—where the western winds could blow the pervasive smell of chemical and carcass to the sea. It was for the messy work of tanning; where the salting and liming and removal of animal remains happened.

"I like your hair."

Her jaw unclenched involuntarily, and Astrid's hands were in the short, feathery flyaways before she
fully digested the comment, smoothing them back behind her ears.

Hackett coughed. "I'm saying… I know you might not have gotten any… any compliments. Not from my—not from Ylva. But in case you were wondering, it looks nice."

He kind of sounded like Fisk stumbling over his own words. Or Hiccup, back when he struggled around her. But Hackett was a bit funny about it. And while she had gotten a compliment—from Hiccup, and from Fisk—hearing it from Hackett almost felt like hearing it from Stoick. A person of importance. Someone who wouldn't let silly emotions get in the way of an observation. If Hackett said it, then it must be true.

She fought very hard not to smile too much or brush the strands back from where they insisted on swinging against her cheeks.

"Thanks."

"There's been some activity in the East," Hackett jumped to, and the pleased hum Astrid felt around her ears silenced.

_East._

She stared ahead.

"Oh?" she said, in a light careless tone, one tinged with the smallest hint of interest. Or so she liked to think; the sensation of her stomach high in her throat might have pitched an unusually high voice.

"I actually wanted to talk to you," Hackett said.

"Not about my hair."

"No." He also watched the path ahead of them. The moment of silliness had passed. "There's a missive going around. Haven't heard much about it other than it's brought up some interesting news."

"What sort of news?" Astrid feigned complete ignorance, even when she could only guess at what it might entail. She kept her fear at bay.

Hackett shook his head. "I can't say at the moment. The point is, we're having some allies stop by today. A Thing that's come up, given recent events. We're going to get up to date with them, and once that's passed I'd like to talk to you more seriously about what you think your next move will be."

Astrid felt her whole face heat, starting at the base of her neck and choking upward. She didn't feel ready—not for the conversation, not for the decision.

"Right," she breathed with what felt like the last of the air she had in her lungs. "Yeah, I—I'll talk to Hiccup."

"Just you, at first. If you don't mind."

She did mind. She minded very much.

But when she went to disagree all that came out was, "Uh…"

They were at the outer tannery; the smell struck in waves every time the sea-breeze dulled.

Astrid couldn't be bothered to cover her nose. There was a matter in the East that was stirring Berk's
enemies in the West and she had lost the time to say something. To \textit{think} of something to say.

"Good lass." Hackett patted her on the shoulder, where Astrid felt her legs leaden and buckle a bit under the weight of his hand, and stepped away. She managed a dazed, parting wave that was lost to Hackett's back as he walked off, his piece said on the matter.

Astrid stood outside Esbjorn's a breath longer, feeding off the respite of the blissful blank her mind had assumed before the inevitable reality that \textit{time was up} came crashing down around her.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, Jenna-sais-pas for being a great beta! Things are getting dicey next chapter!
Koma IV

Chapter Summary

Reef Warrior allies arrive with "News from the East" and Astrid is forced into action

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Astrid took a breath before she stepped inside. It didn't do much. The tart, pungent taste of offal and lime rubbed her face like a dog's tongue, hot and saturated with southern Autumn air.

Gerd bent over a worktable with a span of leather spread before her. She had a measuring tool pressed against the softened hide and ran her thumb down the length, not giving Astrid a second glance. Esbjorn, on the other hand, doddled forward.

"Ah, so you did show up!" He folded his arms across his chest so that it looked like they rested on his stomach.

Astrid shrugged absently, "Didn't see the point in getting cursed."

Esbjorn sniffed, fluffy little mustache bristling.

"Well come on then, no time to waste." He clapped his stout palms and waved her in.

Astrid looked behind her, directly up the hill to Hackett's, where Hiccup had yet to emerge.

What were the chances that he would come see her as she had seen him? Did he even know she was in the second tannery? Probably not. She didn't like the way she was going to be kept separate from him. There was no denying it was on purpose—it raised her hackles but the knowledge that she couldn't really fault Hackett kept her from truly blaming him. If she were in his position she wouldn't trust her either...

Still, she needed to speak to Hiccup. Before Hackett got her alone.

"Love," Esbjorn could be heard saying, "would you...?"

"Yes, yes..."

Gerd dropped the measuring line and slapped her palms against the lap of her apron. A chalky residue rose in tiny plumes.

"Come on, then," she ordered Astrid, already turning away, fingers snapping in the air. "I'll have you at the pits first."

Astrid followed the tall woman out the open, right-hand face of the stand with the western winds belting the back of her neck and the tip of the dark western forests before her.

Gerd walked with her head high over a stretched, thin neck, hands clasped before her abdomen, and Astrid was reminded that this woman was of a wealthy status. A woman who inherited a score of
farmland and a successful business before marrying a religious fellmonger of his own affluence. Gerd had a handsomeness about her that even age couldn't dim, a well-born elegance that didn't match her husband, but there was no denying she married well. They were a power couple.

It occurred to Astrid that Hackett might have even tried to say no to Esbjorn's bid for her time and they simply wouldn't accept the answer. They might have the political pull to do so.

The noxious smell heightened as they reached the tree line. Just beyond the tangled reach of the roots, the ground darkened and dipped into four separate pits, each as long as a Meade Hall table and as deep as three stacked. Ladder spokes stuck up at the lip of every hole and, to the side, long platforms of hatched branches and offshoots had been cast. They must have been the year-round lid for the pits.

Astrid stepped to the edge of one, wrinkling her nose. The bottom appeared fluid, thick, like clay, and reddish. Patches ranging from dark taupe to a fallow tan bobbed in the substance. Her breakfast jerky made a threatening roll in her stomach.

"Last year's hides," Gerd explained. "We need to empty the pit of these so we can fill it with this year's before it gets too cold. We got a lot to get through so hop to it. Down and out, make it quick, and I'll start the setting in the shop. Might even need yeh for a couple days."

Astrid didn't move. She contemplated taking off her footwear, which consisted of a pair of cloth, thin-soled boots.

"Go on now," Gerd waved, turning without ever breaking poise. "Get at least ten pelts over and you can have a drink."

Astrid scratched at the scar tissue of her forearm, took a poisoned breath, and stepped on the ladder.

As expected, her shoes weren't enough for the content of the pit. Her feet were wet in seconds, bits of floating bark skimming her ankles. Astrid reminded herself that she'd done worse. Surely. Even if she had spent her entire childhood training to become a great dragon-hunter in part so that her first priority to the village would be protection and not dedicating herself to an unpleasant trade she could hardly breathe through.

Time passed slowly. The sun moved overhead until it hovered directly over the pits, cooking the solution and the slabs of long-dead carcass with narrow walls that buffered the winds, trapping the magnified scent.

It was a testament to her recovery that Astrid could climb the ladder with no more than two pelts over her arm and walk the distance back to the tannery. They were heavy from the lime solution, and foul from sitting in their own gore for the better part of a year. Oils saturated the shoulder of her tunic; her skin prickled with slickness. A part of her was never more thankful for the short hair, which had been spared soaking in a smell that would take weeks to fully free herself from.

Astrid learned to breathe when the winds picked up, keeping to the eastern side of the pit as often as she could. She learned to keep the pelts to one side of her body, and to bury her nose in the short sleeve of her clean arm whenever nausea rolled.

Sweat salted her lips and kept her hairline damp. Her steps squelched unpleasantly with every trek until the sides of her feet felt as though they were chafing. A moment of excitement livened her sore arms when Gerd finally looked at her from the shade of the tannery.

"That's enough for now," the woman ordered when Astrid tossed down a pair of pelts at the end of
her fifth trip. Esbjorn sat in the corner on a four-legged stool, hunched over a lap full of horns and hooves with a dry scrubbing brush in hand.

Astrid scowled at his clean nails. Behind him was another set of godly figurines, all along the rafters, watching.

What was his deal?

A broad-rimmed mug was thrust in her sights.

"Drink up," Gerd ordered. And Astrid did so, greedily. She felt her senses reset—the odor of earlier dulled, the uneasy nausea suppressed.

Surprisingly, Gerd refilled the cup the moment it emptied, and did so again, once more, until Astrid had her fill.

"Good?" Gerd asked. "Here."

Astrid hardly managed a nod before the mug was pulled from her loose grip and a two-handled setting pin foisted in its place. Astrid wiped her mouth on her clean shoulder and observed the tool.

"I've set some of the hides out there," Gerd explained with a short thumb beyond where Astrid stood; a number of the pelts were lain out flat a good distance from the pits. "I need you to smooth them down with the pin. And I mean good, girl. Use your arms. No juices left, understand?" She waited for a sharp nod from Astrid before continuing. "I'll have you fetch more soon enough, but these need to be prepared to wash before the sun bakes them. Got it? Alright, go on then."

Feet squelching, Astrid knelt down by the closest fanned hide and glanced up as best she could toward Hackett's house. It remained still and quiet as ever, and Astrid couldn't tell if Hiccup had left some time while she was in the pit or not. She hadn't seen him leave yet, and as the sun passed overhead she worried more and more that she had missed him.

Not for the first time that morning, Astrid wished that it could have been the center tannery they sent her to. Where the stretching, shaving and greasing happened. Where Hackett's home was in better view and where she didn't have to struggle to breathe.

"Astrid!"

"Sorry!"

It wasn't long until the knees of her trousers were saturated with the foul smelling solution as well. Sweat beaded around the swell of her cheeks and dripped onto the fur. The back of her neck was damp and heated, unused to such exposure. Astrid pressed her weight as she pushed forward; dark liquid bubbled up out of the skin and trickled into the sparse grass.

"Spotted 'er ships not too long ago," Esbjorn commented loudly. He must have been talking to his wife, as he had barely spared Astrid a glance since he handed her off to Gerd.

"Oh! Have they moored?"

"Must've nearly."

Astrid couldn't see the docks and thought about asking for another drink as an excuse to get up. She could see Gerd fanning her face with the wide blade of a fleshing knife as she strained her neck toward the wharf. Some of her dark grey hairs had fallen loose from her braid and framed her face in
an agreeable way.

"Thank the gods," Gerd murmured. "It’s been dreadfully dull this summer. Might Ragna be coming? I haven't seen her since last Yule…"

"It's a Thing, dearie, not tourney. Doubt anyone but the necessaries will be here."

"Shame," Gerd remarked, staring wistfully out to sea.

Astrid's grip over the pin felt weak, and nothing she did could bring strength into her hold. The Thing. The matter in the 'East'. The decision Hackett expected of her.

Damn. More Vikings on an island where they were hiding a dragon they wanted alive…

Slow-steaming vapors rose from the flattened thicket of fur and choked her. Astrid turned her head into her armpit and closed her eyes.

Their uneasy safe-haven was falling apart and they'd have to make a new move—she'd have to make a new move. She'd have to stick up her chin and say she and Hiccup would leave. Maybe that would buy them more time in sailing in whatever small vessel they might bestow. Toothless could hop the cliff and follow them when it was safe. He could swim well enough...

Astrid recalled the hazy, small dot in the far east that she thought might be some of the more neutral islands west of Berk. They'd have to strike for that. Every other side of the Reef Warriors were enemies or the unknown.

Surviving the distance on whatever boat she managed to procure was the real challenge. That and getting Toothless safely off the island. At least she was in far better condition than she had been when she first set sail. She'd have to promise some extra labor—something—to pay off a suitable enough ride.

Provided they even offer one.

Ylva's short, derisive laugh rang in Astrid's ears and she pushed the pin with enough force to hurt her wrists.

Maybe she could flirt a safe ride out of Fisk?

Her stomach pitched. No, she couldn't do that. Not only did she loathe the idea of stringing someone along but engaging in anything—even flirtation—with someone she felt nothing for made her uncomfortable.

But then, what other choice did she have? Other than swear fealty to Hackett and join the Reef Warriors? Which she could do until they had all the supplies they needed for a tailfin… and then they would go and no one would be able to follow them. Not while they were on dragon back.

Astrid swallowed. It might be the safest route to take. And Stoick would forgive them for the slip in fealty—especially if she returned his son to him.

It was stupid, but Astrid felt the stare of the godly figurines lining the rafters.

Was it forgivable in the eyes of the gods? It would never be something that sat comfortably with her. Hiccup… that was a different story. He had been planning on leaving anyway—his loyalty to Berk, his loyalty to his own oaths, was already in question.
He didn't seem to care what happened so long as Toothless was okay.

And that was the issue. For him at least. Every moment they spent on the small Island with poor Toothless hiding in the shadows was a dangerous for dragon. Every time Astrid had met with the Night Fury it seemed to ask after Hiccup, perking up at any mention of the boy.

Astrid wondered at Toothless’s condition. How long he could last. She had been feeding him fish parts—bones and all, which dragons didn't seem to mind—but could Toothless hunt sufficiently? The other side of the island remained a mystery; it might have been an abandoned beach or it might have been another sheer cliff drop that faced the Murderous Tribe (which was probably in the Reefers' best interests)—

"Oi!" Esbjorn barked. "Careful with that—"

"Sorry," Astrid said quickly, realizing she was uprooting good fur in her repetition. She shifted her weight and worked over an untouched part of the hide.

Shit, she'd hate living here. Without a trade she loved, or people she loved, and with Ylva breathing down her neck...

The worst part, in some respects, was the thought that she'd have to make the decision for Hiccup. That they couldn't collaborate, or agree, before Hackett cornered and demanded an answer from her.

Even if Hiccup had trouble paying her the same courtesy, Astrid didn't like the idea of keeping anyone in the dark.

"Oh!" Gerd cried, sounding a decade younger. "They're here!"

Astrid lifted her head, but she couldn't see much from the ground.

"Ha! So this is where you are!"

Astrid turned. Fisk stood behind her, seeming taller than ever. The pale, fall sun glinted off his bronze skin, his broad jaw coarse from a day of no shaving. He smiled down at her with no hint at anger, though Astrid hadn't realized she'd expected it of him until just then.

"Yeah," she said, awkwardly. The smell of tanning oils hit her, and she was suddenly self-conscious of how they soaked her clothing. "Sorry, but Esbjorn—"

"Ah, don't worry about it," Fisk said, waving her off.

"Oh, good," and Astrid was shocked to feel candid relief. "I was afraid you'd be upset."

"Upset?" He seemed cheerful; it eased Astrid to know he wasn't angry enough to hold her choice to work with Esbjorn against her; one less person to tattle on her. "Nah, luv, you couldn't upset me. How's old Ezzy treating you?"

"Young enough to still hear you, flubberwump," Gerd snipped back in her husband's defense.

Astrid took advantage of Fisk's presence and stood from the furs. It was a welcome rest for her wrists and knees.

"It's been fine," she answered. "Smelly as hel."

Astrid wondered if the sky brightened or if Fisk seemed to smile wider.
"Worse than the fish?"

"Worse than the fish."

He laughed. "Think I'll ever see you around the docks again with a gig like this?"

"This is temporary, thank the gods," Astrid muttered with a quiet side-eye at Gerd. The woman's attention was more focused on the docks, which Astrid found difficult to see around Fisk's broad back. She tried to casually shift to the side.

Fisk placed a hand on a support beam, hunching his back to lean closer. "So that's a yes?"

Astrid refrained from stepping any closer, but she allowed the slight, friendly smile that came to her lips when she said, "That all depends on Hackett, I suppose."

Fisk grinned, a hard white line against his dark face. He took his hand from the beam, straightened, and knocked against it twice.

"Well, I'm about to see him. Esbjorn! Gerd! Meeting at the Hoff Hill soon. They just moored." He turned back to Astrid with a wink. "See you."

Astrid wondered if she had been too friendly. Something funny wriggled in her gut.

"Girl," Gerd called. She tapped a bucket with her toe. "Dump it over by the rock over there."

Astrid picked up the bucket as Gerd began re-tying one of her braids. The water inside was murky and red with floating chunks of flesh. A knife-cleaning bucket.

Still, it smelled a world better than the tanning solution. Astrid dumped the muddied water against rocks, hearing Esbjorn leaving with a: "I'm going to catch Hackett before it starts—"

"Go," Gerd said, uncaring.

"Okay, I finished the first pellet there," Astrid said, turning back to the tannery. "Want me to start on —"

She saw the sails before she realized they were attached to ships. The bright red slug against black.

Her stomach plunged. The bucket slipped from her hands.

"Oi!" Gerd snapped through the side of her mouth, turning with a braid clenched between teeth."Carewul wiw wat!"

Lava Louts.

Astrid might have apologized. She might have lost hearing for a second. Her legs locked and the bucket rolled across stone-packed earth. She could see dozens of small, dark figures pile out of the moored ship.

Of course. Lava Louts. Friends. The whole reason she couldn't let her guard down for a second on this island. Because Reef Warriors were allies with the Lava Louts. And Lava Louts were timeless enemies of Hooligans.

And there was no dragon war to distract them from one another any longer.

...And they might recognize Hiccup. His name, at least. So few Hiccups survived, let alone heirs…
Heirs of enemy tribes...

Shit.

Shit, shit.

Astrid fumbled for the bucket and stumbled back inside.

"Honestly," Gerd snapped, "and here I thought you had some grace to you—"

"Sorry," Astrid said for what might have been the second or third time. "Can I—" her thoughts buzzed, "go wash this off? Real quick, I'll just—"

"Set it down there," Gerd said briskly. "I want as much done as possible. I won't leave you to fiddle around here. Start washing those blades in the basin. There's a cloth just—yes that's the one—oh!"

Gerd's face brightened, scowl eviscerated before Astrid's eyes, as something at the shop's window stole her attention. "Sindri? That you? It must have been near a year!"

"Little less," a deep, but gentle voice returned.

Astrid, hovering by a small washbasin at the foot of the table Esbjorn sat at earlier, couldn't see the speaker. She could see Gerd, however, who tilted her head and placed a hand to her cheek.

"Look how you've grown! Have you married?"

She walked past Astrid, around a support beam, and Astrid took advantage of the flowing skirt, thankful to be so far back in the stable that she'd be unlikely to be noticed. She stuck to the shadows as she risked a look at the man, only to find that he was more a boy hiding beneath a beard.

Autumn skin couldn't hide his blush and the tall lad made a sheepish, and disturbingly familiar, gesture with his hand at his neck.

"No. Maybe. I'm… well, I don't want to get ahead of myself."

Gerd laughed, stepping closer to him. "Lucky lass. Are you with your folks?"

"No," Sindri said, "just me. Da's already down with the cold sickness and Ma's with him."

Astrid slowly lowered herself to the ground and busied herself with taking the dirty blades from the table and dropping them in the basin. She did it quietly, gently, so that the water wouldn't splash. Plumes of red and brown darkened the water. She plucked the cloth from the basin's edge and began rubbing the remains of innards off the knives.

"So what brings the Louts up north?" Gerd asked. "Hackett's barely told us a thing."

"Well Hackett didn't get much of a warning," she heard Sindri say. "No one did, really, but with the winter coming everyone's been working in a hurry." He paused. Astrid worked with slow movements, keeping her head down, but sensed Sindri finally noticed her. He must have concluded that if Gerd didn't say anything about the unfamiliar girl in the shop then he needn't bring it up either, because he went on a second later. "Really helps that we haven't been attacked lately."

"It's been weird!" Gerd agreed. "I swear I haven't seen a dragon in weeks."

"Aye. Same here. Kinda makes you think if this is what it was like in the old days…"
Astrid felt sick. Taut with anticipation and fear.

Conflict was coming. She could feel it in her bones.

The small dagger she just finished wiping down called to her from the tabletop where she set it.

She could do what Hiccup did: grab a blade. With the island full of Louts... the chances of them being recognized... she couldn't be unarmed now. She couldn't feel this vulnerable. Not again. Not now.

"Certainly more resourceful for one," said Gerd. "Business hasn't had any setbacks! So, really, you don't know what this is all about? Not that I mind seeing you for the sake of it."

Astrid cursed herself for setting the blade overhead. It'd be suspicious for her to reach up grab it again; Sindri was facing her and might notice the movements. She couldn't grab anything bigger either.

She could pretend she was re-washing it...

"News from the east—" Sindri spoke.

Astrid scrubbed at a stained handle of the fleshing knife harder. *News from the east? From the east?*

"—a lot's been happening. An heir's gone missing and they think it was a kidnapping."

That was all Astrid needed. Feeling braver than she had when she faced down that Deadly Nadder in the ring months ago, she slowed her scrubbing to reach up and snatch the dagger.

Then immediately began wiping it again in a show of obsessive sanitation.

It was short, unsharpened, hardly worth calling a dagger and probably used sparingly, for small tasks such as cutting bale or picking grime from fingernails. But Astrid needed everything in her arsenal. Everything. She held it loosely against the leg furthest from Gerd and Sindri, whose conversation never slowed.

"What's a kidnapping in the east have to do with over here?" Gerd was asking. "Unless the slavelands are active again. Goodness, do you think—?"

"I think that's one thing we'll talk about," Sindri replied. Once again, Astrid moved mid speech, hoping his conversation would be enough distraction. She tucked the blade into her boot at an angle. "Could be swinging in the other direction too. Power plays between tribes." She pulled her pants over the hilt. "We got some theories but we want you up to speed. We might start a naval barricade soon enough."

They knew.

They knew.

It didn't matter *how* anymore. It didn't matter what Hackett expected her to choose. They had to get out. They had to hide. Because whatever the Louts knew would be passed onto Hackett, and Hackett would put it all together, and Hackett...

He would choose the Lava Louts over them.

*Friends.* The Louts were referred to as friends. She'd heard it too often to dismiss. She and Hiccup would be served up in seconds and used as a bargaining chip against Berk.
Gods, and if Hiccup were put in danger what would Toothless do?

She couldn't bear to think how quickly, how badly, things could turn.

Astrid placed the dripping, clean blades back on the table as delicately as she could. She kept her ears perked, hoping for Sindri and Gerd to move on so she could go find Hiccup. If not, she'd play the bathroom card again.

She kept going back in her mind, trying to find a clue as to where Hiccup was. If she should start with Hackett's or Irpa's. Though she'd never seen he or Ylva leave...

There was no way they've been in the house all this time, surely? Had she been not looking at the right time? It was possible, but...

"—best be off. Astrid."

Her name felt like a slap to the ear. Astrid glanced up, eyes wide with panic.

"You got it all," Gerd said. "Hang those furs I had soaking and head off."

"Right."

Gerd didn't say to where—probably didn't care—and Astrid wasn't going to press the delicate thread of luck she walked across.

"Not too far. I'll have you back here when the Thing lets out. Still lots to do."

"Okay."

Sindri stared at her. Astrid felt her cheeks heat and she stood to her feet, neck bent so that her short hair hung in her face as much as possible. The knife felt like fire against her ankle—a presence so powerful she swore they could feel it too. She waited for Sindri to say something like "Astrid, I know that name..." but it never came. He didn't even ask who the girl was in the tannery, even as she began to shift the furs out of the soaking bins.

Maybe he was saving it for later. For the Thing.

Or maybe there weren't names involved in this 'news from the east'. Astrid wasn't uncommon, was it? Maybe this wasn't about them at all. Maybe the slave rings had rekindled now that dragons were no longer an issue and it was a different heir altogether...

Too many hopes mixed with so much panic. The furs suddenly felt too heavy, and Astrid struggled to pull them from the water, drenching her front.

"Might I walk with you? Esbjorn went up early, the lard. Can't find a lick of manners around here these days."

"Still hinging on the gods?" Sindri asked with a roguish grin, but he gave a flourished nod at a half-painted Freya. Then looked at Astrid.

She looked down again. He must think her mousy.

Gerd took his offered arm. She didn't seem so tall standing next to Sindri's lengthy frame.

"Look at these arms!" Gerd laughed. "So strong. I remember when you couldn't lift a Gronkle skull!" She paused and turned back. "Finish hanging those furs, Astrid."
"Alright."

*Stop saying my name,* Astrid begged. She didn't want anything to be triggered in Sindri's memory. A murmur of whatever calamity happened in the east could very well lead to a chain of events she couldn't stop.

Sindri gave her a nod.

Astrid kept her movements as calm as she could while she hung the furs over a low, wide beam where two others rest, again making a mental sweep for Hiccup's location. Her thoughts were stuck on the same, circular track. They *said* he was to go see Irpa. She hadn't seen him go, but she had been busy. She tried to look, but she hadn't seen he or Ylva heading across the high path towards the healer.

Or had she seen him? A small figure with a crutch… the back of a crutch slipping between husky bodies...

And had Sindri shown suspicion towards her, or just bewilderment at an unfamiliar girl in a home of someone he was obviously familiar with?

She peeked her head out of the shop and looked uphill. Sindri and Gerd had arrived at the foot of the Hoff.

Astrid dropped the fur she held back in the washing bin and jumped back, feeling the blade against her foot. She was done working for the Reefers.

Ylva, she decided upon first stepping into the village. She'd go to Ylva's first.

Maybe Hiccup was still there—Irpa went to Hackett's all the time. She might have made a house call.

Hiccup had seemed pale—Ylva might have made him take a nap before going anywhere. Yeah, that would explain why she hadn't wanted Astrid to walk him there…

She walked quickly, keeping her head down. A heavier presence haunted the village. It felt thicker, like stifling airlessness before a storm. More unfamiliar faces crowded her—darker skin, darker hair, taller, leaner bodies—

"Watch it, lass!"

"Oh! S-sorry."

Her eyes trained on the double-edged scythe strapped to the man's hip. Then, almost unable to help herself, Astrid looked at him—a Lava Lout, with a flat nose and thin face and shaved head. He cocked an eyebrow down at her and carried on. Two more followed him. Astrid looked around and saw a couple more Lava Louts moving up the hill towards the Hoff.

She turned her head down and kept moving. Her fingers felt numb, lightning hollowed her bones. Every sound told her someone followed but whenever she peeked back she saw a clear path. A large portion of the village had emptied upward for the Thing.

Astrid had never felt such relief upon arriving at the chief's door... then it tumbled back into apprehension.

What if Hackett was in the home with a Lava Lout? Maybe the information trade was happening in home, between delegates?
No time, she thought, grimly. The 'what ifs' were killing her. Costing her. She had to focus.


Astrid gripped the cold, iron handle, and pushed.

 Darkness greeted her. For a moment, she heard nothing outside her own padded steps as she moved beyond the entryway. No creaking floorboards or raining dust. A blue light from upstairs dusted the steps—window light if she were to guess.

Her attention turned to Hiccup's bed, just beyond the kitchen area. Something was on it. Or in it. A mass made out through the fading light behind her, which cut as the door shut with a final, grating rasp.

Astrid approached, eyes wide, drinking in any available luster, blood thundering in her ears.

"Hiccup?"

So he had been made to take a nap after all. That could work in their favor.

But Ylva could be upstairs, even if Astrid hadn't heard anything outside her own, uncontrollable breathing. She had to be quiet and quick. She hastened to the bed, weight on her toes, seeing with her hands, dodging the table's corner and lurching for the bed, fingers grasping for the body.

"Hic—"

Her palms found furs. She patted the bed down. Heatless cloth. Trouser legs and buckles.

Laundry. It was a pile of clothes that she had seen. Freshly washed, by the smell of it.

Astrid fell back, chest heaving. Disappointment struck her like a spear to the gut. Hiccup wasn't here. He wasn't...

Irpa's. He must be at Irpa's, then. Yes—

The door screeched. Astrid saw her own shadow cast upon the wall before it severed with a deliberate close.

She spun around, blinking spots that lingered from the flash, a vortex of darkness swimming before her. Another presence screamed at her. Another beating heart. Another set of lungs and footfalls.

She stepped back, ears pricked, and readied herself for a fight.

A figure stepped close enough to announce his height. Then two spark rocks were struck and the table candle lit.

Hackett's aquiline features burst into visibility. Mouth set, grim, sharpened by stark shadows.

"H-Hackett," Astrid croaked. Her head spun. The darkness clinging in the corners of the room seemed to claw towards her. The space felt smaller, hotter.

"He isn't in here," Hackett said. He stayed by the table and his hands remained by his side.

"I..."

Astrid's heart struck her chest so powerfully she thought she might throw up. Then Hackett said
something that nearly stopped it altogether.

"It's you, isn't it?"

He took a single step.

"You and that boy?"

No...

"The missing Berkians."

It was something of a phenomenon—when everything feared, even the silly, the obscure, comes breaking forward in a heavy, singular collapse. For a moment, Astrid thought the gods might have taken pity and stopped time altogether. Except she couldn't move or take advantage, only endure the painful grip of her lungs as all her breath expelled.

She managed to swallow with a constricted throat, and time resumed.

Hackett held her gaze, his words sliding nicely into whatever questions she might have left.

The situation in the East was Berk. The missing heir was Hiccup. The Lava Louts were thinking of taking advantage and the Reef Warriors would help them.

Astrid liked to think that, in excessive worrying, everything might be alright. That if she anticipated the worst of a situation, the disappointments would be tolerable. The setbacks, manageable. A warrior's thought process: expect the worst, deal with the actual.

Or maybe she had been naive in hoping she'd been jumping to conclusions. She should have seen the signs. She should have been prepared for this.

Still, not with all her pessimism could Astrid have anticipated such a frank confrontation.

She'd have to fight. They'd have to fight.

Hackett took another step closer.

Astrid dropped to a crouch, pulled the short blade from her boot, and jumped up with one foot braced behind her in a strong, widened stance. She brandished the knife at him. He wouldn't see the details in the poor lighting—how dim and laughable her weapon was.

"Get back!" she snarled, making a sharp, sideways swipe.

Hackett lifted his hands, both empty. "Easy, girl," his slow, steady voice mixed with the dim lighting made for a soporific pull Astrid found herself actively fighting against. "I can help you. I want to help you."

He came closer. Astrid refrained from slashing the knife at him again but something kept her from fully accepting his words. The sheer despondency of the situation clung to her like a wet cloak that she couldn't shed. Nothing but her own strength could save her. Her strength, and her speed, a useless, little knife, and her refusal to trust anything he said.

"Don't," she commanded. "Just…"

She needed him to stop. Just for a second, she needed...
Hiccup. She had to get to Hiccup. She had to warn him. And Toothless. Toothless, they had to find. Then they’d swim. They’d steal a boat. They’d jump the cliff with the Sharkdragons and take their chances—

"I want to help you," Hackett stressed again. "But I need to you calm down and listen to me."

He kept his hands up the way Hiccup did when she had him cornered in the cove almost three months ago. A universal calming gesture.

"How?" Astrid kept her voice stiff, even as she felt it crack in her mouth. She took another step back. Her arm lowered slightly. Her ears begged her to listen. An offer of sanctuary. A solitary chance to keep the situation under control.

She wouldn’t offer him the satisfaction of seeing the seed of hope he had sparked.

Hackett didn’t answer immediately. His beautiful, slanted eyes dropped to her tunic—shaggy, damp, stained and foul—then back to her face.

The hair on the back of Astrid’s neck pricked. That seed of hope crushed, even before he murmured, "You said you’d do anything, right?"

It was like the floor had fallen away, and Astrid realized she was caught between a wall and a bed and Hackett.

"I—"

Hackett stepped closer.

"Stop," she commanded.

She made to lift the knife again but Hackett moved faster, grabbing her wrist with a large hand and slamming it back against the wall. Astrid cried out as her fingers lost their hold. She swung out with her other hand, catching the junction of his collar and neck. He grunted and grabbed that wrist too, bashing it to the wood hard enough to scrape Astrid’s knuckles.

"No—" she choked.

He threw his weight against her. Her back and body pinned.

"Now—stop that—" he grunted to her struggles.

"Get off!"

"Just—calm down, girl! Be reasonable."

Astrid writhed. She tried to kick out her legs but she couldn’t do much good with her thighs and hips taking most of his weight. No amount of tugging her arms would free them and the difference in their physical strength was horrifying.

She blindly snapped forward with her teeth and got more cloth than flesh. Hackett shouted. Astrid clamped down harder on his arm.

It worked. He pulled away, shaking her bite, drawing her from the wall.

This time when she kicked she got his shin.
Hackett still had a vise on both her wrists. He threw her back against the wall with blinding force.

Astrid heard her own head crack against the wood. Before she finished crying out, he had pulled her back and slammed her again. Pain erupted at the base of her skull, shooting down her legs.

"I'm going to help you!" He battered her a third time and Astrid felt an alarming weakness overtake her bones. "You need it."

He retook his position of pinning her with his own body and something switched in Astrid. The distress of her situation receded and in its place came rage. A powerful, unforgiving fury that turned her whimpers guttural and heated her wrath, pulling strength from an unknown reserve.

How dare he. She would destroy him for this. As soon as he let up, as soon as he stopped crushing her against the wall, she would utterly ruin him.

Breathing through her nose, she stilled long enough to growl, clearly, "Get. Off. Me."

"Are you ready to listen?"

She considered biting again.

"Get off."

Hackett rolled against her and a noise of distress Astrid hadn't known she was capable of erupted from her throat. She tried to cling to her anger.

"I can keep you safe," Hackett's voice lowered. His lips moved against her hairline. "You and your boy." Astrid smelt his breath, felt his arousal. "You want that, don't you?"

His hips pressed against her belly, as they moved her stomach pitched.

"No!" she snarled, throwing her head around so he couldn't whisper down on her again. Her bruised skull hit the wall. "No!"

"Come on, now—"

Her fingers went numb and white. Her arms ached. Astrid hated her body. She'd never hated it more than in that moment.

"—be reasonable—"

A force hit them both. Hackett gave a loud cry in her ear, and then his body fell away, his hold on her released.

Weakened, unsupported, Astrid stumbled to the side, catching sight of a large, dark figure before she landed in the hay pile that had been her bed for the past two and a half months. The outrage and horror of seconds earlier absolved and in their wake came an empty, helpless instability that made her wonder if she would ever stand again.

It struck violently. Her constitution had gone, her stomach loose. She couldn't stop her limbs from shaking. She couldn't keep her own breath from rattling in her chest or the whimperers that broke through trembling lips.

She hated her body. She hated it. She hated everything.

Ylva stood over a groaning Hackett—a heavy, iron ladle held in one hand. The chief balanced on his
knees, with one hand braced against the wall and the other rubbing his head, protesting.

"Ugh—damn it, woman."

Ylva kicked her husband in the side, then struck him again on the back of his head. Hackett crumpled and his groaning ceased.

Astrid scrambled to her feet, hay flying.

"Ylva," she gasped, "Ylva, please." Her own throat felt alien. Her voice unfamiliar. "I-I-I never wanted this. I didn’t… I didn’t think..."

Ylva said nothing. She continued to stare down at her husband with the oddest expression. Mournful. Tired. Unsurprised. The pan in her hand clattered to the ground.

The table candle flickered, casting a softness over Ylva that Astrid would have never attributed to her.

Ylva's mouth moved and Astrid had to guess at the words; it might have been the moment, or her own desires, but she swore she saw those uneven lips whisper, "Get out."

Astrid's knees threatened to give out as she stepped sideways to the door. She waited for Hackett to spring up and grab her.

"Ylva…?"

The woman's arm twitched. Astrid didn't know if she ached to strike out at Hackett again or her.

"Go," Ylva said, never taking her eyes off her husband. "I don't care how. Just go. Get off this island. Don't ever come back."

All hesitation lifted. Astrid sprung to the door and gripped the handle.

"Thank you," she choked.

She fled the house, leaving Hackett crumpled on the ground and Ylva standing over him with an unforgettable expression of love.

Tired, heartbreaking love.

########

Astrid sprinted cross the village with Hel on her heels. For the first time since she could remember, running didn't shake her need to cry. Her vision blurred, eyes burning. Her chest hurt. It felt like her heart had broken.

She could still feel Hackett's presence looming over her, even with free, frigid air spilling across her cheeks and arms. Her skin burned from where he had grabbed, itching with the memory of how he looked at her, down on her. With desire and calm. With control.

Perhaps he had always looked at her that way and she just hadn't seen it.
How had she not seen it?

How could he? How could he have…? She liked him. She respected him. He was a chief. A leader. He wasn't supposed to… to be like that.

A sob broke from her throat, which had gone sore, as though the thousand silent screams she'd swallowed had left a mark.

More new faces milled around the village, some wearing painted armor with the Lava Lout insignia. Astrid weaved and dodged and prayed no one would stop her. She couldn't handle anyone grabbing her.

She saw Fisk, familiar by his size, and shame came crashing over her once more, fresh and caustic. Astrid turned her gaze down, strangely aware of her cheeks' wetness, and hoped he hadn't called out to her. Sound fell away, blocked by the thrumming of her own blood and the increasing winds, as though the very air was affected by the fury simmering beneath a shroud of grief. Fury that never quite abated.

She took the isolated path to Irpa's with powerful, fast strides, never looking back to see if someone pursued. When she reached the door she burst inside without so much as a knock.

"Hiccup!" she gasped, "Hiccup!"

She slammed the door behind her and spun, ready. Her dagger was gone; someone could burst in any second. Hackett—

Hiccup stepped out of the side stall where dried herbs were stored. "I'm here! Shhh! Astrid—what?"

Astrid spun again and felt something crack upon looking at him. She lifted a hand, desperate to grab onto something, and then brought it back to cover her mouth.

Breathing normally suddenly became impossible.

"Hiccup, we ha-have to go." Her voice splintered. The burn in her eyes returned and tears fell heavy, as though she had abandoned all efforts to get control of herself. "Please. Please, we have to… to go. We have to go."

She hurt. Everything hurt. She'd never felt such humiliation in her life and she didn't know how to handle it, all made worse by her inability to fight.

She'd never been so incapable. So inexcusably helpless.

"Ast—okay. Okay." He reached out to her and Astrid recoiled. She hadn't meant to and Hiccup's pause upon her reaction came as another punch to the gut.

"Right now," she insisted, voice waver ing.

Hiccup nodded, backing off. His eyes were wide but his mouth had settled into an iron line.

"We'll go," he agreed. "Right now. Okay. Yeah. You have everything?"

Stunned, tearful, but unable to rationally follow Hiccup's compliance Astrid gave a sharp nod. She had nothing, so of course she had everything. Everything but her dignity.

If she strained her ears she swore she could hear the village humming—people talking, distant laughing, less distant shouting.
"What happened?" Hiccup asked.

Astrid could only shake her head. She had to screw her eyes shut to keep from sobbing. This was horrible. This was so stupid. She had no reason to be crying.

"I'm sorry." Nothing had happened. "I messed everything up." Nothing had happened.

She whispered because she had to whisper. Any louder and she'd crack and cry and they'd be that much more delayed. Her head continued to shake, bringing attention to the thrumming pain. She couldn't seem to stop shaking. This was the last moment in the world for her to lose control, when someone could burst in and take them, with Hackett around, with so many questions she needed answered—such as, when did you get here, and what do you know, and where is Irpa—but all Astrid could do was feel sorry for herself.

Hiccup appeared alarmed by her behavior from the start, and incredulity lifted his voice. "What are you even—? Astrid, you—you saved us. We're alive because of you! I don't—fine. Never mind. Come on, we're leaving."

Astrid flushed. Air continued to catch in her lungs, unreliably.

"How are we going to leave?" she breathed, trying to calm and rationalize. "Steal a boat?"

"We can fly."

"How?" she asked, finding his unexpected words helpful in calming down.

Hiccup had a grim look about his face. Longer hair draped across his nose. "It's going to be risky, but I can do it. I did it before. It can't be too long of a flight, right? We can see land on clear days."

A shout sounded in the distance, loud enough to muffle through the walls of Irpa's home. It might have been a bawdy Lout, having drank too much. Or a call for action.

"They know," Astrid said, sounding nasally. "They know."

"Yeah, I figured," said Hiccup. "Well, I didn't really, but—is that's what's gotten you so—? I mean, is that why...?"

Astrid merely shook her head again and forced herself to keep talking, "We need to leave. We get to the forge, grab what you need, and then to Toothless—"

"Toothless is right outside," Hiccup interrupted.

"How—?" Astrid found herself asking again.

"He goes where I go, remember?" It wasn't Hiccup's slight smile that gave Astrid a much-needed breath of relief, but the knowledge that Toothless was nearby. "And we don't need the forge," Hiccup went on. "Just the forest. Let's go."

Hiccup approached the door and paused with his ear to it. Astrid realized he didn't have his crutch (where was his crutch?) and if they had to move fast she might have to carry him. She tried to buck up and erase the past ten minutes from her mind. She hoped her breathing wasn't as loud as she feared.

"Here."

When Astrid turned, Hiccup was holding out a knife. The same knife that shed her hair. She took it
without thinking, feeling a small stab of safety along with the wrap of a hilt in her palm. A comfort toy.

This one she wouldn't lower.

Hiccup moved, slipping outside, and Astrid followed, unwilling to stay in the eerie house a second longer.

"This way," Hiccup said, and he turned right to the small cluster of trees to the west of Irpa's house. Astrid didn't look behind. She thought she saw a crowd moving uphill. They might have gathered at Hackett's… or at the Tannery… or maybe somewhere by the Square's well…

Their time was up. It didn't matter what she interpreted—how paranoid or hopeful or suspicious or naive she might be—they could no longer stay on that island.

She tore across the garden, catching up to Hiccup quickly and pulling his arm around her shoulder before he fell against uneven dirt. He gave a grunt of thanks and together they blended into the dark trees. Hiccup slowed, looked around and pushed against her side to get her to head left. "This way."

Astrid trusted him. She put too much trust in him, especially now, when she didn't think she could trust again at all. She wanted him to take control, and, at the same time, she wanted to escape any outside form of it.

Hackett's phantom grip returned around her wrists. The back of her head throbbed harder than ever and she wondered, idly, if it would be safe for her to sleep—should she ever reach the comfort for it again.

Hiccup slowed them. "Hold on… ah, here!"

He left her and Astrid felt coldness sweep in his wake, felt that phantom grip tighten on her wrists. She focused on Hiccup, who moved to a pile of ferns and pulled them off. Beneath was a tailfin. Iron rods and cut leather, all crude but recognizable. Despite everything, Astrid didn't feel the sort of surprise she might have in other circumstances.

Hiccup rubbed his nose and shrugged down at it. "Took me most of the night… mostly because I couldn't really do much without moving—"

"Explain later," Astrid hissed. She was barely aware of the grip she had on the knife. They were losing time and daylight. The noise from the village plagued her.

They would be coming. They had to be coming.

A presence moved behind her. She whirled, knowing it was Toothless and still nearly screaming.

Then, the oddest thing happened. The dragon didn't bounce to Hiccup or explore the tailfin (though Astrid had a sneaking suspicion he was already in sync with Hiccup's hiding spot); Toothless moved immediately for Astrid.

She recalled her first intimate experience with Toothless. How he sniffed and nuzzled her and made the same noise he made now—a cooing murmur that hummed through her body and warmed her.

"I'm okay," she whispered with a hand on his head. Even in saying it, the urge to cry resurfaced. She'd punish her body later for it—she'd never be that weak again.

"Bud?" Hiccup called and suddenly Toothless was gone.
Astrid took a breath and moved over to Hiccup. The boy became a whirr of action. He lifted the tailfin and hobbled over to Toothless's tail. The dragon remained faithfully still, watching patiently.

"It's go time," Hiccup said to his dragon. His hands were fast and moving, fingers flying over straps of leather that he used as fastening ties. "And we don't have time for safety, so please, bud, bear in mind where I am."

Where he is?

Hiccup straddled Toothless's tail.

"Astrid," Hiccup motioned towards Toothless's back. "Get on. No saddle, so be careful but… be gentle too. Don't grab the plates on his head."

"I won't," she promised.

Hiccup stopped her before she could climb aboard.

"Oh, and could you hold onto this?"

He held out his prosthetic. She hardly noticed him wrestle it off earlier.

"What?" Her sheer alarm knocked her internal turmoil to the side. "No! What are you—?"

Her stomach dropped.

Dear fucking Thor.

It made sense now—they could fly. They shouldn't, but they could.

Hiccup had no rigging. He was going to stay on the tail and control it himself.

He jimmied the metal leg. "Please."

"Hiccup, you can't—"

"Get on." He commanded. He had a force to his voice that shocked her—no ramble or question. It was an order. When Astrid continued to hesitate he blew out a breath of frustration. "You want to get off this island now or not?"

Yes. Yes. They had to. She got them onto that island and now Hiccup would get them off. That's how they worked. As a team.

"Oi! There's no one in here!" The voice was close enough to have come from Irpa's.

"Astrid!" Hiccup snapped.

Astrid moved, grabbing the prosthetic, jumping onto Toothless' back. Legs light, stomach tight.

"We're going east," she heard him say, behind her.

"I know."

"Bud!"

They lowered only the barest amount, but Astrid felt the powerful creature bunch beneath her legs like a coil. Then Toothless jumped. Astrid kept her eyes on the purpling sky, kept her body pressed
against the dragon, one arm around the girth of his neck with the other clinging to Hiccup's fake leg.

There were too many branches ahead. The space above too small and the trees too close. She heard more shouting. She heard their feet, their steps, the rustle of a hurried pursuit.

They were getting closer and they—she, Hiccup and Toothless—were too slow.

The rise was rocky. Reaching the tops of the trees might have been the most treacherous, terrifying short moment of flight in Astrid's life—with the Reefers and the Louts creeping into the forest, shouting for them, and the branches of the trees tearing them down, and their very lives hinging on the power of Toothless's wings.

And then light washed over her. Direct, orange, bright and clean.

The sun dropping in their very destination, like a beckon, might have made for the most beautiful memory Astrid would ever know. A breath where the past few minutes—the past few months—were washed away and hope trundled in to warm her against the chill of winter and memories.

Chapter End Notes

Giant thanks continues to go out to Jenna-sais-pas, who remains an incredibly talented and patient editor, putting up with both me and my terrible grammar.
"What happened?"

Astrid sniffed. The cold air had been good for her. The horror of Hiccup clinging to the back of a dragon's tail had settled somewhat when they leveled out. Watching him hold on—upside down—for a spell as they rose out of the forest helped redirect her internal anguish to something immediate and outward. It was the sort of distraction she needed to help blur earlier events of the day: a different sort of fear.

And Astrid had greatly feared Hiccup falling. She feared the tail collapsing and the three of them plummeting back into the ready ranks of gathering Reefers...

It never happened.

Nor had any arrows come. No weapons or fire. No one had been prepared to see a black dragon rise into the sky and fly off—not with their lively Thing and reunion going on, not after a long spell of raidless nights—but the thought that they might attack had kept Astrid's skin aflame in the cold. It kept her twisted in her seat upon Toothless's neck, one eye on Hiccup, the other on the Reefer's Island...

It wasn't until the land had become a hazy rise in the horizon that Astrid looked forward, Hiccup's metal leg clutched in numb fingers.

The flight had lasted an eternity. The shadow in the distance—a mere bump—never seemed to grow, while the sea rapidly darkened as it absorbed the fading sky light. Astrid's chest rattled with chill by the time she chose the first piece of land that came in their path: an offshoot of a larger mass. It was more rock than soil. Uncultivable, with a small cluster of trees and fauna for protection.

Twilight had hit hard by that point, with the rough sort of lighting that played tricks on a human's eyes. Astrid insisted they face west in their camp. She insisted they start a fire for warmth, but deeper, behind a wall of thin trees. In case, she repeated. In case.

Hiccup had pulled her down to sit against Toothless's hind legs before she could start searching for spark rocks. She nearly fought him over it, but a quick flame from Toothless and the arrival of heat on her face drained the lingering nervous energy from her body. She fell bonelessly against the warm scales, aware of Hiccup's gaze and of the hollow ringing in her chest and of the packed rocks pressing into her thighs.

"Astrid," Hiccup prompted. He kept his leg off, his fingers kneading around his calf. "What—"
"They might be following us," she said, stupidly, with the thought of retribution still tight in mind. She wanted another subject. Were they worth following? Probably not. Could she allow herself to think Hackett and the Reefers were no longer a danger? No.

Beside her, Hiccup shook his head.

"They won’t get close enough without hitting a hundred obstacles." He bent back a finger. "Distance, for one. Plus, Toothless would sense them before they ever made it to shore."

She felt Toothless grumble below her. She didn't know if that was an agreeing grumble or a complaining one. It was the first time she had ever sat with a dragon warming her back and, despite all she had been through with the Night Fury, Astrid couldn't quite make herself relax.

Or, perhaps, it had nothing to do with Toothless at all.

Hiccup did have a point—boats were infinitely slower than dragons and they'd already covered rôsts.

Plus, the Reefers, or the Louts, would probably have to sail through a bunch of Sharkdragons.

"Astrid…"

Shit.

She wrung her wrists and pulled her knees up. "I can't talk about it."

"Did... did someone hurt you?"

*The wood against her skull, the bruising on her spine, the roll of Hackett's hips against her stomach.*

She could still feel the throb in the back of her head, even now. It worsened with the clench of her teeth.

"Hiccup!" she barked. "I said I don't want to talk about it!"

She couldn't seem to get the sensation of hands from her wrists. She rubbed them along her thighs.

Hiccup threw up his hands. "Okay! I—you scared me. I've never seen you so..."

"I know, okay?" To keep her arms still she crossed them. She told herself she was only still shaking because of the cold.

"Will you stop?" Hiccup snapped the demand and Astrid gripped the insides of her elbows. His next words came gentler. "It's okay to be scared."

No, Astrid thought. It wouldn't be okay to feel scared until she was back in her bed. *Her* bed. In her home. Protected by her people.

"I… I couldn't do anything," she heard herself whisper.

Hackett had been so much stronger. Nothing had happened, but that moment had been everything. A horrifying reminder of how powerless she was compared to others. Her arms useless. Her body pinned against the wall. His weight pressing against her and how his voice had turned… *twisted*. A husky sort of murmur that she might have found attractive with the right person, now tainted. Forever.

"I've gotten so weak."
"Weak!" Hiccup laughed and annoyance prickled the back of Astrid's neck. "You're weak? Look at me, Astrid." He waved thin arms along his body. "I could barely lift a weapon even before all... all this."

He settled back against Toothless. The dragon curled around to settle his head on Hiccup's lap and Astrid swallowed back the brackish taste of envy. Her eyes fell to the prosthetic in his hand, then jumped to the outstretched stump, cottoned by day-old bandages.

"How's your leg?" she asked.

"It's... leg." Hiccup deadpanned. "It's... fine, I guess."

"Hurts?"

"Of course it hurts."

Astrid nodded once. He didn't want to talk about his weakness. She didn't want to talk about hers.

A short silence descended where the kindling popped and Astrid felt the rhythmic rise and fall of Toothless's belly that somehow matched the rolling surf barely within view.

"I'll take first watch."

Hiccup's words came unexpectedly, and Astrid sucked in a breath. He gave her an apologetic smile. "Sorry. I was just thinking..." He shifted forward to don his leg and Toothless lifted his head, nonplussed. "Well, we should have someone awake no matter what. Just, you know, in case—"

"I'll do it," Astrid interrupted quickly. She placed a hand on his chest, sharp and fine like a bird's, and pushed him back against the wall of dragon. "It's getting dark. I'll feed the fire a bit more."

Hiccup fought against her hand. "I'll help."

"Sit. Rest," she ordered, and she found she desperately needed to issue a command. Some tension eased from her chest.

"Then let me take first watch," he bargained.

"No, I will." Hiccup looked fit to argue. Astrid added, "I can't sleep anyway."

It was true. If she slept now she'd only see replays and haunting memories and, worst of all, the exaggerated would-have-beens.

Hiccup still sat forward, still held his prosthetic in hand. "Astrid, come on."

"You did most of the work," she reminded him. "I need to do something."

He glowered.

"Please."

Hiccup held her gaze a breath longer. Then he settled back, the hand with the prosthetic slackening so that it rolled from his fingertips. He seemed exhausted, small against the outstretched Night Fury. His hair was flyaway and tangled from the flight and the small fire cast harsh shadows beneath his eyes.

"Fine," he sighed, with the sort of deep and weary voice one might hear from a tired, old man.
Astrid gave a wane smile at the small victory.

"I'll wake you up in a few hours," she said, getting to her feet. Her body immediately missed the dragon. Cold moved it; it gripped her shoulders and nipped her down her spin and Astrid tightened her jaw. She approached the fire, drinking in its touch as a poor substitute.

Had Irpa's fire been lit? Astrid couldn't remember and it worried her. Her surroundings in the memory darkened. It was all too quick, too terrifying, too confusing. Hiccup had been there, but she hadn't known for how long—she had never seen him leave Hackett's house. And where was Irpa? Why was Hiccup alone?

Old questions resurfaced, things she hadn't the mind to consider hours ago.

Astrid lifted her face, heat tickling her chin, in time to see Toothless raise one large, elastic wing and drop it over Hiccup.

########

Hiccup woke her up.

Astrid drew all her willpower to keep from reacting too harshly—or letting on that she had had her eyes closed.

"Oh, hey," she said quickly, twisting in her seat. She had kept her back to the fire for most of the night and kept her eyes on the west. The waters were as black as the sky, with only the moon and stars acting as waving, bright crests.

"Did I miss anything?" Hiccup asked. Even standing over her, silhouetted by the fire, she could see his smile.

"Uh… no, wait—" She stood, brushing dirt from the seat of her trousers. "What time… what are you doing up?"

It was still dark. Incredibly dark. The world silent with sleep. Even the sea seemed to have quieted.

"I'm done sleeping," Hiccup said.

Astrid glared at the moon overhead, a waxing, pale orb visible through clear skies. It had only just peaked.

"I say you still have another hour or two."

"No," he said, slower. "I'm done. I can't—I mean, I'm done sleeping."

Astrid blinked at him. She felt such fatigue in her bones she couldn't imagine not choosing sleep. She looked beyond his shoulder to where Toothless remained down, his chin on the dirt but his eyes open and watching. He flicked an earfin.

She was too tired to argue. If Hiccup wanted to be sleep deprived for the rest of the day, fine. That was on him.
Astrid turned her attention to a matting of fallen leaves not far from the fire. She had noted it earlier in the night as she walked the perimeter and deemed it warm and soft enough to nod off on. She tried not to think of her own bed. The pile of cozy quilts and impacted pillow, both cool with no body to warm them every night…

"Uh, where are you going?" Hiccup asked upon seeing her shuffle some of the leaves with her foot into a pile.

"To sleep, munchbucket."

She wouldn't admit that she had nearly nodded off twice. She felt drained and thirsty. Crying had left her even more exhausted.

She'd never admit that she had cried either. Silently, swallowing a thousand times to keep from making any noise, unable to shake the horror of earlier, which reared any time her distracting thoughts settled.

It gripped her still, like a loose hold on her neck that would tighten, piercing, should she allow it.

Nothing had happened: the mantra she repeated again and again, hoping to ease the bilious lob in her chest.

But if Ylva hadn’t shown up…

You would have used your teeth, and squirmed, and screamed, and grabbed a weapon at your first chance and beat him off like Ylva had.

Would she have, though? Would she have risked screaming and attracting the Lava Louts? Would she have risked throwing away all they had fought for? Risked Hiccup's death and a lifetime as a slave?

The answer scared her. She didn't know.

She felt a soft touch at her side. Hiccup was next to her, pointing to Toothless.

"There, Astrid. Sleep there."

"What? No. That's…"

That was Hiccup's spot. That was Hiccup's dragon. Or, Hiccup was his human. Whatever. She wasn't a part of it.

Hiccup sighed. "Astrid, don't be stupid, it's cold. And you deserve it."

She turned and arched an eyebrow, ignoring the stupid remark because a part of her felt she did deserve it. "I deserve to cuddle with a dragon?"

Hiccup mirrored her brow lift. He smiled.

"Have you ever cuddled with a dragon before?"

"I don't… No. That's not a thing I do."

He shrugged. "Don't knock it 'till you try it."

She was cold and tired and Toothless seemed so much more inviting than the ground, but Hiccup
was watching her and her pride had taken enough hits for a lifetime.

"Just go," Hiccup urged.

Toothless lifted his wing and thumped his tail. Astrid recalled seeing Hiccup wrapped in Toothless’s wings—bony, reptilian, scaly wings they might be—and how she wished, even if only for a spell, she too could be taken from the world and shielded from all its cruelties.

She inhaled through her nose. Without looking at Hiccup, and stepping heavily to show her displeasure, she approached Toothless. Toothless *harrumphed* and switched his gaze between her and his side expectantly. She crouched, rocks creaking under her thin boots, and crawled, resting in a place she never thought she’d find herself two months ago.

The dragon was warm; she felt that rhythmic rise and fall of his belly again. The tail came around next and wrapped against her stomach. Astrid thought she would feel trapped, trapped like she had back at Ha—back at *his* house. But it was a womb-like cocoon, with the breathing and the soft vibrations and the blanket of his tail conforming to however she turned her body.

She shifted to get comfortable, curling more than she was used to, and rested her cheek against where his stomach bloated from his ribs.

Toothless might have sensed her distress because she felt him rumble with a soft croon. She peeked over her shoulder and met his eyes, large and glassy and nearly orange with the reflection of firelight.

"I'm okay," she whispered. Toothless snorted, but for all Astrid could tell that was simply dragon for "I'll believe you this time".

Toothless dropped his wing over Astrid as he did for Hiccup and the world blissfully disappeared.

Contrary to her earlier fears, sleep came quickly. Astrid’s last thoughts were of Ylva and if she had killed her husband or let him live… and how she seemed to have already known what he was capable of…

#####

#####

"How was your first dragon cuddle?"

"Shut up."

"That good, huh?"

Astrid straightened her tunic, refusing to look at Hiccup in the bright dawn light and instead glanced to the dragon in question. Toothless's tongue lolled out of his mouth as he smiled, still panting from his morning run-around. As soon as Astrid awoke he had shot off (sending her toppling backwards) and bounced around the forest in, what she suspected, was an activity to stretch his legs.

She wondered if it tried his patience to have small humans sleep on him. She'd never considered dragons patient creatures before...

"Is that how you're going to pitch it when we get home?" Astrid asked, brushing back her hair with
her fingers.

Hiccup's mirth died almost immediately.

"I... hadn't really thought about it." Hiccup paused. "Okay, that's a lie. I thought about it the whole time but—it won't be easy."

He didn't seem as well-rested as she felt, which served him right for limiting his own sleep, but that might have come with taking second watch. His hair seemed worse than hers and nearly as long, shaggy and knotted. He sat on the ground next to the smoking husks of their fire, fiddling with the cup of his prosthetic.

Astrid's stomach rumbled. She glanced at the thick foliage growing between trees, wondering at the chances any of them produced berries.

"What do you think they think?" Hiccup asked. "Berk, I mean. Did they notice we're gone?"

"Did they—?": Astrid turned, mouth agape.

Hiccup winced, hands flying. "No, no, I mean, yes. Of course they did. You, especially—"

"And you. You're Stoick's son." She couldn't believe what she'd just heard, even if he had misspoke.

He muttered something towards his knee, something Astrid missed entirely, but even the low volume couldn't mask the derision.

Astrid crouched in front of him. "Hiccup, what do you think happened back with the Reef Warriors? The Lava Louts knew that Berk was missing its heir. Berk was looking for us and the wrong people found out!"

"Yeah, I know, I know," he said, still to his legs more than her, "but... I just wonder if they've moved on by now. That's all I meant. It's been—I dunno—a couple months? And without any dragon attacks—"

"Of course not!" Astrid interrupted, harsh. Her family would be shaken, for years, at least. Their only daughter, taken? Absolutely. And Stoick... Stoick would be a wreck. Surely, Hiccup would know that?

Or not.

Hiccup picked at a loose string in his shirt. "I... I thought a bit about maybe dropping you off at Berk and, ah, figuring thing out on my own a bit."

"Hiccup!"

She was going to hit him. Freya help her, she was going to lay him flat on the forest floor, cripple or not.

"I mean the leg kind of puts a damper on things," he continued quickly. His voice dropped with the screech of his name, not wishing to incur any more of her wrath. He gripped the ground at either side of his hip and hunched forward, staring at the outstretched half-leg. "But maybe some more time without any attacks will be good for them? They can be, you know, less angry at dragons. You can assure my dad I'm still alive. Tell them what happened. I-I mean, they probably won't believe you but when they stopped getting attacked that'll serve as some sort of proof, right? And... I'll come back. Probably."
Astrid bounced on the balls of her feet, hugging her knees with her arms. She willed him to look up. To meet her eyes.

"After… everything," she hissed. "You're just going to leave?"

He couldn't. How could he?

Hiccup, finally, picked up his chin. His hair shadowed his eyes, but Astrid saw the corners pinch with his troubled frown. He glanced to the side. To Toothless—where the dragon sniffed around tree bases.

As though sensing an audience, Toothless looked up, staring at the pair. He flicked an earfin, dismissively, and resumed his hunt for...whatever.

"Astrid… I—" He exhaled heavily. His head jilted to the side, throwing the hair from his face so he could address her more directly. "Think about it. I'm not living without Toothless. I can't. He needs me. And, well..."

Astrid wouldn't pity him. Fury thawed the last of her drowsiness.

"I shouldn't be surprised. That's what you were doing in the first place, wasn't it? You were going to leave."

Maybe she should have let him.

Wait... she was going to let him. He came after her.

She shook her head. It was too long ago—she couldn't dwell on what-ifs or whys. "Don't you think your dad deserves better?"

Stoick's soft spot for his son was notorious, a blight for an otherwise flawless chief, but a fiercely protective father. He never properly disciplined the boy, which was probably why Hiccup got away with so much damage to the village. Astrid couldn't imagine what the chief must have gone through—losing the last of his family. What he might still be going through. How could Hiccup ignore that? How could he be so callous?

Hiccup stared after Toothless once more, who now arched against a tall pine and scratched the bark like a cat sharpening its claws.

Astrid leaned over her knees. "The war is over, Hiccup. Berk needs to know. And I'm not telling them without you."

Hiccup sighed again. His eyes never left the dragon. As though sensing his gaze, Toothless looked over, still caught in a pose against the tree, and smiled a gummy smile.

Astrid instantly understood the name.

"I'm not leaving Toothless," Hiccup repeated. "And if Berk can't accept him? I'm… I'm leaving. That's that."

Astrid blew out a hard lungful of air. She couldn't stop him. Or, rather, she couldn't force him to stay. Hiccup was willful. Independent. And insanely loyal to a very select few. Toothless, for one.

But not to their home.

"They'll accept him," she promised. "I did."
Hiccup twisted his mouth in thought. Toothless padded up to him and Hiccup. Hiccup, moving in sync without truly looking, rested a hand atop the dragon's head.

Squinting somewhere around where her toes scrunched in the dirt, fingers absently scratching Toothless, he said, "I don't think we gave you much of a choice."

"Then don't give them a choice!" Astrid's voice rose and for the first time she didn't worry if someone might sense them. "If you want peace for dragons and humans, then fight for it! Don't run away!"

She meant it, Astrid realized, with an old, familiar rile in her lungs. She meant every word of it. Hiccup could change their minds. He changed hers enough that she fought—desperately, painfully—to keep him alive.

"Hiccup, you... you stopped a war. Because you—oh, I don't know—you saw things no one else saw! You've got to... you have to help everyone else see them too."

She had to bring him home, not just for her chief or her own peace of mind, but because ending the war was only half the battle.

Hiccup stared at her.

"You're right," he said. Focus returned to his eyes. "You're right. Yeah... okay."

Astrid settled back. She felt... better speaking passionately about something that mattered to her. Showing Berk how to live with dragons mattered to her. Hiccup staying mattered to her. She put so much into keeping him alive that she couldn't imagine just letting him go again.

"Damn right, I'm right." She stood, left knee clicking, and grabbed her wrist to pull it, straight-armed, across her chest. She reveled in the familiar twinge of muscle. "We're heading home, we're going to talk to your dad, we're going to tell them the truth about dragons, and we're going to show them how you are with Toothless."

"Yeah..."

She didn't like the falter in his voice, nor the hesitation. Then Hiccup shared a look with Toothless and Toothless—Astrid would have had to have seen it to believe it—Toothless gave a slight, very human, inclination to his head.

"Yeah," Hiccup repeated, this time stronger.

It was the best she could hope for. For now.

"So," Astrid said, satisfied for the moment and stretching her other arm. "Fish for breakfast?"

Hiccup shrugged. "That or tree leaves."

Astrid offered her hand and he accepted without thought. She hauled him to his feet, making a mental note to watch his eating habits when they got home.

"I have to scout the area first," she said. She'd like to exercise some. Some pull-ups on a low tree branch or a couple hundred crunches. She needed to feel some soreness in her arms and gut. That rewarding sort of pain she used to thrive on. She couldn't wait to get an axe back in her hand, a proper weight.
"Blade?" Hiccup handed her back the dagger. *His* dagger really, his steal, but he seemed to consider it shared. "We can just scout with Toothless. Nothing around here's more dangerous than him."

Toothless woofed and puffed his chest. Astrid laughed, prompting him to bound over to her, sniff her neck for no apparent reason other than to make her let loose an involuntary giggle, and then bounced back to Hiccup, lopsided tail whipping in the air. The prosthetic fin flapped open and closed, like a broken fan.

Astrid cocked an eyebrow. "I'll stick with the one thing I can control, thanks." She flipped the blade in the air and caught it.

She didn't miss the fact that Hiccup moved only when Toothless was back at his side, with an elbow rested on the dragon's thick neck. He favored his leg heavily.

"You sure your leg's alright?" she asked.

Hiccup took a breath, as though he had been hoping she wouldn't say something.

"Honestly? I don't think I'm going to be winning any races on it. It's... I'll make it to Berk."

They started moving to the shore—he and Toothless as one, with Hiccup bracing an arm around the dragon's neck. Astrid hopped to keep pace.

"Is it supposed to hurt that much?" she asked. He had been so much better just a day ago. But then he had ripped the leg off and thrown it at her in the flurry of leaving the Reef Warriors. Followed by a very long time clinging to the back of a dragon tail—harsh winds and frigid cold tearing at a thin bandage…

Maybe they even struck a branch in their flight out of the Reef forests.

"I don't know, Astrid," he said in that low, dry voice he often used for the likes of Snotlout. "I've never had a body part chopped off before."

Astrid turned her attention to her other shoulder. She could practically see the opposite side of the island, if it could be called as such. They were camped in more a smattering of trees than a forest.

"Sorry," Hiccup muttered after a few steps and a stretch of silence. "I'll ask Gobber about it when we get back."

She forgave his tone, a small smile on her lips. "So you are staying?"

Hiccup made a show of cricking his neck. "Well, I gotta make a go of it, don't I?"

Astrid smirked. "No choice."

Toothless ran ahead and pounced on a pile of leaves near a break in the trees. He pawed at one yellowed patch in particular, where a squirrel darted out seconds before his claws touched down. The dragon gave chase.

Amazing, how a hide as dark as his could so easily disappear into a thin, well-lit forest.

"No choice," Hiccup agreed. Astrid moved to take Toothless's place without seeking any permission. Hiccup gave no qualms, linking in with her offered arm.

"But you'll admit something's off about it," she pressed.
"Probably got a little roughed," Hiccup admitted, sparing his bad leg a frown. "I mean, I guess I didn't give it the right time to heal, too."

"Because you snuck off every night?" Astrid heard her own thin reproach and recalled her annoyance at Hiccup's lack of communication.

"It's a good thing I did," he responded under his breath, not looking at her. Astrid acquiesced with silence.

The shade of the trees peeled back as they stepped onto a short, grey-pebbled shore. Salt water reached for their toes, whitened in an uneven, bubbly curve. The tide was weak, the water tinged green in its clarity. They must have walked east, as the next bout of land floated before them about a single röst away, clear in view, with a wider girth, thicker trees, and more flora visually available.

There could be other life on there. Human life.

It was a bit beyond dawn, Astrid realized with a start, as sun was approaching the apex of the sky.

Damn, how long had Hiccup let her sleep?

"Think there's anyone over there?" he asked. Even with a hand to his brow he had to squint.

"We have to assume so," she responded. "And we should be careful about Toothless out here. He's very visible on a day like today."

"Yeah, he's—wait, where is he? Toothless? Tooth—Ah! Ow..."

Astrid had kicked his ankle. "Not so loud!"

Hiccup scowled. "What? There's no one there now."

"*Now* being the operative word."

"Toothless is fast and we look harmless."

Astrid rolled her eyes skyward.

Hiccup settled for a shrug. "Eh, he'll come when he comes."

"Want to sit?" Astrid asked.

"Nnn—ah, yeah, actually. Yeah. Thanks."

Astrid allowed him to pull away. He was quite good at controlling his weight on the one leg, and he managed to lower himself to the ground with his half-leg outstretched.

A soft noise spoke before either of them could. Astrid held her puling stomach and gave a weak laugh. Hiccup didn't hold back on his.

"We can probably find some fish out there," he said with a dying chuckle and a wave toward the stretch of seawater.

Astrid gave her stomach one last rub to quiet it. "It'll have to be fish," she said. "I don't think there's any berries around here."

She'd kept her eyes peeled on the short walk, but none of the sparse vegetation seemed to produce
anything edible for humans.

There were probably fish close to shore. They didn't have any material for line so it would have to be a shaved spear that got them their dinner. She could find a good sized stick

Taking a breath, Astrid bent over and pulled off her right boot.

Hiccup leaned back on his hands and stared at her.

"Uh... what are you doing?"

"I'm going to wade in," Astrid said, teetering a bit, she used Hiccup's shoulder to steady herself as she removed her second shoe. "I'm going to see what the situation is. If there's much to spear. There should be, but—"

"Spear?"

Hiccup said it with a scoff and Astrid grunted, "Well, did you bring any line with you?"

It occurred to her then, with the sharpest pebbles digging into her heels, that she should have been nicking supplies from Fisk in those last few days that she felt closing in. Small things. Line and the like. Metal. Hooks. She should have been slowly storing them away as Hiccup had.

Hiccup let out a single laugh.

"Don't bother with that. Toothless can help."

Astrid paused with her trouser leg bunched in her hands, pulled halfway up her calf.

"Toothless?"

"Don't kick me," Hiccup said. Then he cupped his hands over his mouth. "Toothless!"

A beat passed. Astrid rubbed her eyes, sore from the harsh reflection of the sun over waters. Then a mass shot from the tree line at the end of the shore, startling two birds into the sky. Toothless bounded over, splashing up the shallow water. His tail whipped behind him like a serpent.

"Hey bud! How about—whuhh... ah, what's that?"

It wasn't until the dragon had skidded to a stop, spraying them with small rocks, that Astrid noticed the red muzzle, the liquid dripping from scaled lips. A matted, furred tail poked between Toothless' teeth and swung over the curve of his jaw.

"Okay, I'm a little less hungry," Hiccup muttered.

Toothless dropped the crunched squirrel at Hiccup's hip.

"Nope! Nope!" Hiccup said hastily. "That one's yours, bud. All yours."

"I'm going to wade," Astrid announced. She began drawing up her other pant leg.

"No, it's fine," Hiccup said, twisting to her. "Toothless can get us some in no time.

Astrid pointed at Toothless's sticky mouth, where clumps of fur still clung to his cheek.

"You're trusting that to get us breakfast?"
"Toothless is a great fisher," Hiccup defended.

Toothless was a horrible fisher.

Rather, he was horrible at sharing fish. The dragon ate most of what he caught and insisted on only serving them regurgitated bits.

In the end, Hiccup managed to get him to drop a couple cods without too many teeth marks, which involved some choice words, much one-legged hopping, and some well timed scratches under the Night Fury's jaw. Astrid wanted to move back to their camp where they at least had the meager shelter of a few trees but Hiccup insisted they'd be fine, that the view was nice and, if worse came to worst, they could skip that island and its inhabitants entirely.

(And his leg hurt, he whined. He just wanted to sit a while.)

So they stayed. Hiccup prepared the fish. Astrid refused—having had her share for a lifetime, despite, admittedly, gaining great skill in the process—tossing the knife back at him and saying any and all fish were now his jurisdiction. She managed to squeeze in some well-needed calisthenics before he finished gutting and scaling the catch. She set up tinder for a new fire before Toothless spit some life into it, then spent some time practicing her jabs and swings with the shared dagger as Hiccup rotated the fish.

Toothless found her actions endlessly entertaining and immediately wanted to play. They had to tell him repeatedly to stop trying to grab the dagger from her lest she accidentally stab him. It took Hiccup throwing cod guts at Toothless to get him to leave her alone.

By the time the fish was cooked enough to consume, Astrid had a nice ache in her shoulders and pull against the back of her thighs.

All in all, it was a nice quiet moment, even as they kept one eye on the sky for dragons and the other on the sea. Astrid sensed Hiccup wanted to linger, or enjoy the time away from everything, and she found she could use the break too. They didn't talk about Berk or the Reef Warriors or where they would go next. No one knew where they were. There was no immediate rush or danger. It was a moment out of time.

Hiccup had his prosthetic off again with the remnants of his bandage washed in seawater and hanging out to dry. Astrid tried not to stare out of respect, but the skin of his stump was red and scarred and after they finished eating, with Toothless crunching on the bones, it took Astrid actually kicking him in the kidney (gently) to get him to let her check it out. It looked bad. It was the only diagnosis she could give him.

"You don't have to touch it," he muttered, drawing his knee into his chest and away from the light nudge she had given to his shin.

Astrid let him.

"Well, there's nothing we can do until we get back," she declared, forcing the unease from her voice. She knew from experience that Hiccup would barely feel the immediate touch of her hands on the
outer reach of the scar—only deep pressure on a scar could register. She didn't dare touch bottom, the angry red that had blossomed where there had once been bone. "Gothi will fix this right up."

Hiccup nodded, picking his teeth with a thin rib of his meal. "Figured. Don't worry about it; I'll make it to Berk. It's more uncomfortable than anything."

Astrid nodded. "So long as you don't get sick from here to there, we should be fine."

"And so long as they don't have to cut more." He said it lightly, the same idle tone he used when speaking of not returning to Berk, and Astrid reevaluated his response to both; perhaps they mattered more than she was led to believe. "We should figure out our next move."

"Yes," Astrid said quickly. "I agree. We should keep moving east. Keep it direct. We can jump the next island if we're careful. It looks healthier than this one. Seems like there's life over there. I, well," she blocked the sun with her hand and squinted at the treeline, "yeah, nope. I don't see any movement, or haven't, so that's encouraging…"

"I was thinking we should travel at night," Hiccup said. He dropped the small bone he'd been using into the gravel.

Astrid's brow furrowed. She sucked some of the fish oils off her thumb, tasting the remnants of her breakfast. "So… you want to hang around here for the day?"

She didn't like the idea. The thought of staying stationary didn't sit well with her, for sure. What more: it felt lazy. The nearest land looked about two rôsts off. A short swim if they couldn't fly. But they could island hop in the light, surely?

"Fly at night," Hiccup amended, as though following her thoughts. "We can see what we can cover for now… wait, let me—"

Hilariously—and she should have expected it—Hiccup plunged a hand into his tunic. He reemerged with a folded, flimsy cloth, one small and light enough that Astrid might have never noticed its weight falling against the inside of Hiccup’s tunic.

It was thin, threadbare along the edges. Hiccup unfolded it, yanking a long, pale string from the corner and flicking it from his fingers. He spread it across the small space between them.

Astrid saw splashes of blues, greens and reds. Familiar spacings and careful scripts of long-memorized words.

"What is that?" she asked, her voice high.

"It's a map."

"I know—" Astrid took a breath and pinched her brow. "I mean, where'd you get it? Irpa's? The forge?"

"Hackett's."

Ill feelings arose at the name. Astrid swallowed them back.

"He had a map down there?" she forced on.

She'd subtly looked for one dozens of times. Along with other weapons. Sometimes food. In cabinets and under chairs.
"Upstairs," Hiccup said, absently scratching his cheek with a dirty nail.

"You went upstairs?"

Hiccup appeared amused by her question. Or, perhaps, by the intensity of it.

"I was moving around more than people realized," he said. "I get left unsupervised a lot."

Astrid crouched in the dirt beside him. "What else was up there?"


Astrid shook her head. "And you just… took it? Did it occur to you that they might notice? Are you just good at taking things? Can you even help yourself?"

He had taken the dagger from the forge without remorse. Astrid recalled how he was back on Berk, always doing his own thing, his own way, no one really stopping him. Not even his father, the chief. Hiccup had grown up entitled and forgiven.

"I mean…" Hiccup looked around, seeming oddly bewildered with himself. "I guess I'm not really in the habit of asking. But—but we needed it! What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. I-" she sighed. "I just wish I knew we had it."

"Oh," he said, blank-faced. He didn't realize, of course, how it upset her that he didn't speak so candidly with her. That she had to instruct him to. "Well, we do," he pushed on. "It's more localized, but I can see this for the edge of Bashem," he traced his finger along the bumpy curve of an unlabeled green lump, "and up here is the foot of the Visithugs, so if we're exactly—wait," he leaned back on his haunches. "We did head East, right?"

"East and slightly north," Astrid confirmed.

"We're not on Silence?"

"Can't be. They're only cliffs. No beaches. And I saw Silence." She waved her hand somewhere off to the right. "We're definitely here." Astrid tapped the west most island of the Puffin Isles with the knife.

"Good. Then we fly over the rest of the isles," he dragged his finger across the cluster of Puffin territory, "over Bashem," the next, solid landmass, "and straight onto Berk."

Astrid squinted at the stretch of Sullen Sea between Bashem and Berk. Then more so at the unmentioned landmass.

"And over the Isle of the Skullions." Astrid pointed out.

"Yeah," Hiccup drew out the word. "Er... well, we can avoid that. We're south enough. We'll keep that on our north bank."

"Done," Astrid said quickly. "So now we'll have to pick places to stop." They had a similar distance to cover as the one last night, but desperation alone had kept them going. That particular motivator, thankfully, no longer drove them. "You can't do another night like last's."

She couldn't shake the feeling that it was the flight, the manual control of the tailfin, more than anything, that had overturned the state of Hiccup's amputation. It was the freezing winds, the rough
treatment, the stress on his body—a body that was still struggling to recover.

When they got to Berk she would tie him to Gothi's hospice bed for a good two weeks.

Hiccup snorted and Astrid couldn't tell if he agreed or not.

"Edge of Bashem?" he suggested.

Astrid twisted her mouth.

"There's probably a village there. There's probably a bunch of villages along the Isles…"

"I do wish it was more commonplace to simply pop up in a new village," Hiccup sighed.

Astrid snorted. "Not in an archipelago." Not this one, even without the dragon war as a threat.

Gulls called in the distance. The sun baked her exposed neck, puncturing through the late autumn air.

Hiccup jabbed at the map again, on the west coast of Bashem. "So just west of whatever village might be there. We should be able to—hold up. Toothless!"

The dragon wasn't anywhere where Astrid expected him to be. She last saw him through the rising wisps of their small fire, stretched and licking his chops.

But Hiccup looked directly to the trees, where Astrid could make out a flash of red. Then the gleam of his eyes came to focus. Then the silhouette of his body. Toothless paced within.

Either Hiccup's self awareness was far beyond anything she expected or, as she'd grown to suspect, he intrinsically knew where the dragon was and vise versa.

Hiccup held up the map and prodded it several, exaggerated times.

"The next place we land—set camp—I need you to direct us as far from where there are humans."

Toothless came forward, crunching through the light brush and back into the sunlight. He sniffed the map Hiccup upheld.

"Got it, bud?"

Toothless huffed and turned away.

"Really?" Astrid deadpanned.

"He can see in the dark," Hiccup explained.

"Yes. But does he understand?"

"I think so."

Toothless curled, licking at some area on the base of his tail. Hiccup gave a weak chuckle and avoided her eye. He reached for his prosthetic.

"I guess we'll see tonight," Astrid said. She fought down her smile. "At least we have a plan now. We keep low, rest up, move at night. Make the last leg tomorrow."

"Sounds good," Hiccup affirmed. Then he laughed. He raised the prosthetic he was about refasten and rattled it. "Last leg."
Astrid snorted, but she felt her mood rising. She felt light. Excited. She'd be home soon. She'd have a bed and her parents and everything would be okay again. The nightmare was ending.

Hiccup folded up the cloth and tucked it into his tunic; she could see it fall against the thin material and stop at his belt. Now that she knew it was there she could never unsee it.

"Is there anything else you're hiding in there?" She gestured to his tunic. Hiccup glanced down.

"Uh…" He actually pulled his collar and looked inside. "No. Er… well—"

"Anything you stole?"

"Oh. No."

"Nothing else that could be useful?"

Hiccup rolled his eyes. "No, Astrid. I'm sorry I didn't immediately tell you about the map, but I was going to. I mean, I did. Just now. It happened."

"Hmmm."

He stood awkwardly. Pushing up on his right leg, tottering for a moment, and gently distributing weight onto his left. He turned away from her—possibly deliberate, feeling her watch him, and Astrid busied herself with stamping out what still smoldered of their fire.

"Hey," she said, clinging to a measure of confidence she thought she had lost. "Let's see if we can hop the next island before dark."

Hiccup side-eyed her. "This is from the girl who wanted to eat her fish in the forest?"

Astrid put her hands on her hips. "I think we can do it. Right, Toothless?" Toothless sat at attention, staring at her with wide, perplexed eyes. "We can just… glide, right? There's probably more food. We'll get a good meal in before we get to Bashem."

"I guess…" Hiccup said slowly. Toothless seemed onboard, with ears that perked with the mention of food. "Assuming we don't run into anyone."

"It's been quiet so far. There's more cover. We can always glide back if we run into anything," Astrid listed. "I'm starting to suspect there might not be any humans over there. Or on the other side, at least."

"Okay," Hiccup said quickly. "Fine. We can aim for a hop. If Toothless is—" he turned to address the dragon, only to get a faceful of tongue. "...Game."

Astrid grinned, peering at the opposite shores where unknown dangers and rewards lay. She felt ambition energize her—or perhaps a shadow of it, like an old imprint that still fit. The urge to put one foot in front of the other for no other reason than herself.

They could do it. They didn't have to, but they could.

And she'd meet anyone who got in her way and win.
Big apology for such a long wait (for those that were waiting). And an even BIGGER thank you to Jenna-sais-pas for being a great beta!
Astrid and Hiccup start their journey home with a new pressure hanging over them.

In a long sequence of misfortune, Astrid really needed a win. Choosing to hop one island over turned out to be a good decision.

Toothless glided most of the way, with Hiccup hanging onto the tail, his face dangerously close to the water as he held the fan outright to mirror its natural counterpart. Their fear of nearby villages kept them from venturing too high in the daylight, which, in turn, kept them ignorant.

The beach had more sand than rocks. The thicket of trees just beyond—the same they had spied from another shore—was flush with life, just as Astrid had hoped. Darker leaves, richer foliage, and louder. Astrid had the blade out before her weight could fully sink into the sand. Twitters and rustling limbs called to them. She strained her ears for any other sound as she handed Hiccup his prosthetic leg. Her eyes scanned for movement as she helped haul him to his feet.

“Let’s get under cover,” she murmured. “Find a good place to camp.”

Together, the three of them stepped into the lively forest; Hiccup leaning heavily between trees, Astrid traveling ahead with light movements and a tight hold on the knife, and Toothless wired with sensory overload. The dragon’s activity countered Astrid’s quiet caution. He circled their progress, nose to the ground. He’d pause, perk, flick a couple ear fins, and then resume his loud sniffing.

Astrid spotted bilberry shrubs and bunches of juniper and fallen acorns on their walk. Clusters of milkycaps and the red tops of jacks. Birds flapped in their nests and critters circled trunks, scattering at their approach. If she were lucky she might be able to catch some larger game without straying too far from the boys. They still had more than half a day’s worth of light left.

Whether she’d be able to take it down with the meager knife was a different issue.

“Tooth’ll sense any humans long before we do,” Hiccup assured her. Astrid didn’t lessen the grip on her blade.

“I’d feel better knowing where the closest village is.” At least then they’d know in which direction to keep an eye out.

What she found, instead, was a surprising amount of light ahead after nearly half a mile. And thinning trees. And the end of the small, dense forest.

“Well...” Hiccup said, awkwardly, braced against a tree, “that wasn’t too long.”

Toothless bounded back to his side and Hiccup gratefully leaned an arm on his head. Astrid was left to approach the end of the trees first with a glaring sun offsetting her vision and the comfort of no human noise. The light settled, and Astrid found herself staring over an open field of grey-willow
and witchwood. It stretched into taller grasses, a meadow dotted with scrub, reaching as far as the hills in the distance, where low, grey clouds—or smoke, she couldn’t tell—rose just beyond the crested horizon.

Astrid finally let her blade arm drop. She turned back to the boys. “Seems clear.”

“I think Toothless already determined that,” Hiccup said, coming up from behind.

Astrid ignored him, squinting at the direct sun. More clouds passed overhead, softening its harsh flare.

“We've got half a day still,” she determined. She felt uneasy about crossing the open meadow, about leaving the security of sea and vegetation.

Toothless made a noise—agitated, with an alarming winge to heighten its pitch. Astrid stared at him as he paced back and forth, his head up, alert, and pointed in one direction. She followed it, soon spotting what couldn’t be mistaken for clouds: a steady slate stream. Rising smoke beyond the hills.

Her stomach lurched and Astrid heard her own voice form a word within the resulting exhalation.

“Puffins.”

At least they knew where a village was.

“We wait until dark and move then,” Hiccup decided. He limped over to a thin tree, a Moor Birch, and lowered himself to the ground by the weight of his one good leg. “Suppose it’s good,” he grunted as he settled on the hard roots, bracing his back against its slender trunk, “that we made the jump. We got a decent read on what’s ahead.”

Astrid found herself nodding.

They had the trees for cover and an open field separating them from civilization. They’d be fine.

“Alright,” she began, and with a sharp flick of her wrist she threw down the knife so that its tip buried into the moist earth at Hiccup’s hip.

“Astrid!” he shrieked.

Astrid threw her head back and laughed. It felt good.

“Sorry,” she said without meaning. “You hold onto that. I’m going to forage while it’s still light out.”

Hiccup shifted where he settled, but didn’t take the knife. “Shouldn’t you, uh, take it? I have Toothless...”

Astrid shook her head. “Just keep an eye over the field. I won’t be too far.”

“Well then have Toothless go with you,” he argued.

“I won’t be too far,” she stressed again. “Toothless can help you on lookout.”

Hiccup twisted the prosthetic from his leg and glared at Astrid through his bangs.

“I don’t need help watching hills, Astrid.”

“And I don’t need him making noise as I pick up mushrooms.”
Toothless appeared to decide for himself what he’d rather do and laid down at Hiccup’s side, opposite of the knife. Astrid found herself pleased at seeing Hiccup sandwiched by means of protection.

He didn’t seem to agree.

“Really?” he deadpanned at his dragon. Toothless responded by dropping his chin on Hiccup’s lap, his large, triangular head dwarfing thin legs. He stared up at Hiccup until Hiccup begrudgingly settled his hand and raked his nails along the dark crown.

Astrid grinned.

“Thanks Tooth. I’ll be back before you can count to one hundred.”

Hiccup snorted. “Just shout if you need help.”

“For Toothless? Sure.”

“No, for me,” Hiccup drawled. “You know me. Speed dragon.”

Astrid rolled her eyes and returned to the abounding forest, retracing their straight trek of earlier to where she had last seen edibles.

She returned nearly half of an hour later with her tunic half-lifted and cupping a collection of berries, mushrooms, and some acorns. Her walk took her far longer than a count to one hundred; even with her good haul as an excuse, Astrid expected a snide remark upon her arrival.

Somehow, she wasn’t surprised to find Hiccup asleep instead.

His eyes were closed, his head rested heavily against the tree, and his hand remained still and heavy atop Toothless’s head. Toothless, at least, remained awake. He fixed his half-lidded gaze on Astrid as she emerged from the forest and thumped his tail against the ground.

The knife was exactly where she had left it.

“Some watch,” Astrid muttered.

The field appeared as undisturbed as she had left it. Longer shadows, perhaps. More rustling as the winds picked up.

Her attention shifted to the steady smoke stream, just as heavy as it had been before.

It must be a smithy to be running all day like that…

She tried to imagine the village on the other side of the hills. Was it like Berk? Lumber-driven and painted? Were the sunny side of those hills dotted with sheep and farmland and fallow fields?

Or were they like the Reefers? Rock and hearty and fishmongering?

She leaned towards the Berkian side. The village was set too inland to be a fishing village. She knew also knew Puffins to be peaceful. Towards Hooligans, that is. Not so much to dragons.
Astrid took a moment to observe the pair: Toothless with his head on Hiccup’s lap, dozing but alert. Hiccup entirely pale in contrast to the bark.

Astrid frowned. If he got sick from his leg... well, even if they got back to Berk it might be too late. Toothless must have mirrored her thoughts, or read the naked worry on her face, and let out a low moan.

Hiccup stirred. The hand on Toothless’s head clenched into a fist and he shifted, opening his eyes, seeming shocked at the weight on his lap before registering who it was.

“Hnnn, oh, damn,” he blinked, straightening his neck as he rubbed his face, “Hey ‘strid...”

“Nice nap?”

“Mmmhmm,” Hiccup hummed, wincing as he shifted again. Toothless picked up his head, freeing Hiccup’s legs, and gave Hiccup a nice, heady lick to the face.

“Ugh, no—Tooth—please—” He pushed the head away, wiped a hand across his cheek, and froze.

Astrid realized, with slow-rising mortification, that she still had her shirt half-lifted to hold the food, leaving her midriff, perhaps the underside of her wrap, exposed.

She dropped to a crouch by Hiccup’s side, near where she had thrown the knife, and cleared her throat.

“Well I found some snacks,” she said, quickly brushing away leaves and twigs and loose dirt before dropping her plunder on the cleared ground. “They’ll keep us going, at the very least...“

Hiccup sat up straighter and became fixated on the knots of indigo fruit. “O-oh, yeah. Uh, that was... quick.”

Astrid kept her head bowed to hide the quirk in her lips.

“I’m more worried about water,” she admitted, picking a milkcap from the pile. It had occurred to her as she walked the sun-patterned woodland, chewing on a dew-soaked mushroom.

“Yeah,” Hiccup coughed, as though suddenly realizing his own thirst. “I was thinking the same thing.” He plucked a truss of bilberries and shoved them into his mouth. A happy sigh followed. “The berries’ll have to do for now,” he said over the mouthful. “I wish we had something to carry liquid in. We might be able to boil some of the sea water...”

“I’m not comfortable lighting a fire when we can see their smoke from here...” Astrid paused with a berry in her mouth. “Unless...”

“Unless what?”

“There might be a stream. Or a river.”

Hiccup swallowed. “You think?”

Astrid nodded, angling in her crouch to look at the climbing exhaust.

“The village—that way—they’re too far from the shore.” She had to wonder at that. Maybe the western coast suffered bad storms? Her eyes darted higher, to where the clouds thickened in the past day. “There could be a source of water though... one that runs through the hills. If we were to walk...
the length of the forest we might run into it.”

Hiccup nodded, chewing his next mouthful quietly. His eyes fell to his lap.

“Tonight,” Astrid stumbled on, embarrassingly loud at first. “Tonight, when we fly. We’ll stop by whatever we can find.” She popped one last berry into her mouth and removed herself from the food. It would last them a while more. She’d be sure to forage again well before dark.

“Think you can wait that long?” Astrid asked.

“I can, yeah.” Hiccup eyed her. “Can you?”

She considered their itinerary. Some water, one more stop, then home. Astrid would go the entire journey without water if it got her there faster.

Excitement flooded her core, spreading down to her legs until she began bouncing on her heels.

“Oh yeah.”

In the meantime, she should get some energy out of her system with some of her old routines. Maybe she’d exhaust herself enough for a nap. Or feel more comfortable with her body.

She rolled her shoulders and shook out her hands.

“Thirsty people don’t work out,” Hiccup called from the shade.

“I’m not that thirsty yet,” Astrid countered. And it wasn’t a workout. Just exercises.

She spread her stance and leveled a couple side jabs to her left. She felt it down her back—the tightening and the release. She did a couple more, faster.

“Besides,” she said with a right hook to interrupt the series, “We don’t know who we’ll run into.” Cross right. Knee. Duck. “I need to know how to fight.”

“You know how to fight.” She could hear his dry amusement. She didn’t need to look at him to know his brow had gone flat and his eyes had narrowed as he shook his head.

Astrid repeated the series again, faster.

*But not as fast as she used to be.*

“I need the reflexes back,” she grunted, keeping her weight on her toes. “I spent too long—“

And then Toothless was in front of her, crouched, pupils as large as her fists. Astrid yanked her arm with a yelp.

*Nng—Toothless! This isn’t play time!*

“Get’r Toothless.”

“Hiccup—no!” she snapped, using the same voice of disapproval she had on the dragon. Hiccup picked up the knife from the dirt, grin in place, and started shucking the bark off a short stick he’d found within arm’s reach.

Astrid blew the hair from her eyes, held out a palm to Toothless and said, firm and singular: “*No.*”
The dragon appeared to have settled. Satisfied, Astrid turned to put him at her back and started her boxing series again.

A real partner would have helped—something her fists could connect with. For now, just reinstituting the old reflexes would have to be enough.

Black swung into her vision again and Astrid pulled her hand back just in time for Toothless’s swipe to miss it.

“Toothless!”

Hiccup’s cackling had her snapping his name next.

Toothless bounced to the side and then back in front of her. His back claws skidded up dirt. His tail curled upward, waving like an off-timed pendulum. His earfins pressed against his neck.

“Toothless, come on!” Astrid moaned. “Hiccup, can you—?”

Hiccup had pulled his full leg to his chest and rested his cheek against his knee. “I think you should play with him.”

“I’m not playing,” Astrid growled. “I’m—hey!”

Toothless tried to paw at her front again. Astrid jumped back in a wide stance, to which the dragon stooped, his back end squirming.

“Toothless,” she started again, mustering as much threat as she could between clenched teeth, “I swear, if he tackles meeeee!”

Toothless launched.

Astrid pitched to the side with a great leap. Her hands scrabbled against the earth as she darted to the only safe-haven she knew: into the forest, slipping around the base of a wide tree.

Toothless gave chase. She could hear him behind her; his grunty breathing with his tongue hanging out, the thud of his wide feet kicking up soil and roots.

“Toothless,” she gasped, “co-come on—! No-n-no—eek!”

She swiveled around another tree. And another. She pranced over roots and slipped on dried leaves and scrambled from the dragon’s reach again and again, sensing more than seeing him. He sounded so close—always just behind her—that Astrid was left wondering if he kept a purposeful distance.

Her blood rushed and her face felt hot and her cheeks oddly cold. She huffed and shrieked and, every now and then, an expletive laugh would burst involuntary laugh, mingling with her huffing and shrieks.

Toothless cut her off for the second time and Astrid only just managed to duck the paw batted at her by taking a sharp pivot that nearly wrenched her ankle, the momentum allowing her to dive just below Toothless’s chin and summersault back to her feet. The dragon was left stumbling into a pair of close-growing trees.
“Ha!” she crowed, sprinting back to the meadow, straight through the thinner trees, finishing with a jump over the half-eaten pile of edibles.

She didn’t feel the burn in her lungs until she had lurched to a stop, blood pounding all the way down to her heels.

Hiccup slowly chewed on a milkcap, its tawny brim poking between his lips as he slowly pared a pointed end to the stick.

“Gooh workouh?” he asked around the mushroom.

Astrid spit several stray hairs off her tongue and rested her hands on her hips. “Well,” she panted, “I guess that was one way to—“

A black mass rushed her peripheral. Then a great weight slammed Astrid to the ground. The power of the blow resonated through her ribs and back, rippling muscle and bone, all before the crushing burden pinning her down registered.

“Easy, Tooth!” Hiccup’s voice came, alarmed.

Astrid screwed her eyes shut and coughed in air. Her neck ached from straining to save her own skull.

“Get... off...”

Something wet lapped at her ear and Astrid released an undignified squeal.

“ Toothless!”

She wriggled her arms free and pushed at his muzzle, attempting, to the best of her disadvantage, to shove his head off of her.

Hiccup’s moment of apprehension edged back into laughter. Astrid was going to stab him with that stick he’d sharpened.

She settled for clamping Toothless’s jaws shut with her hands as best she could.

“If this were a real fight I would be stabbing you in the eye right now,” she snarled in her efforts. Toothless managed to dart the forked tip of his tongue out to flick at her chin.

“If this were a real fight, do you think he would just be pinning you?” Hiccup chuckled.

Astrid found herself unable to match his amusement.

Her wrists throbbed. Her stomach tried to climb out of her throat. That rising, simmering panic returned, quickly and unwelcome, always impossible to fully swallow.

She focused on Toothless’s fish-heavy breath and forced calm over herself.

“Okay, can he get off me now?” Her voice came steady and low, to her immense relief. Hiccup, still chuckling, half crawled the short distance to where she was pinned.

“Watch,” he instructed. He reached forward and Astrid had to tighten her gut to keep from reacting as his fingers neared her side. She concentrated on his movements, watching as he took three fingers to the depression beyond Toothless’s jawbone and scratched with some force.
Astrid felt the following purr resonate through the dragon’s throat against her stomach. She witnessed large, green eyes roll back into his head—an expression of utter bliss taking over, discernible even on a dragon—before Toothless fell into a boneless daze.

For the second time she felt the wind expel from her lungs.

“What was that?” she grunted. She managed to shimmy sideways enough to free herself from the dozing dragon. She could feel a throbbing somewhere along her shoulder blade and knew it would likely be black and blue tomorrow.

Hiccup made a show of examining the same nails that had just put a Night Fury down.

“Oh, a little trick I figured out...” he said in faux lightness. He glanced at her and smiled. “I even used it in the kill ring once or twice during training.”

Astrid paused in shaking dirt from the back of her tunic.

A lifetime ago when she stood before a downed dragon with her axe held eye and her arms falling limp.

“Wait... the Nadder?”

Hiccup scratched his chin. “Yeah. Yeah it was a Nadder. Good memory.”

“I remember because I was gonna get that,” she muttered. She certainly recalled the rage that followed in the wake of her shock. The self-imposed humiliation. The feeling of being cheated. She had been so furious with Hiccup...

Hiccup didn’t seem to be following her same line of thought. His smile grew larger, if rueful. “Good thing I got there first.”

“Good thing...” Astrid repeated. She knew it was better, on some level, that she had been bested back then. She had been bested several times since. She had been nothing but bested...

“It’s a pressure point,” Hiccup was saying. “As far as I’ve figured, anyhow. It might not even work for all dragons... Hey, are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Astrid said immediately. Her hand sprang away from her wrist. “Yeah, sorry. His head was just heavy. I couldn’t breath, is all...” She gestured to where Toothless—

—had been.

She stared at the imprint left by his body. “Er... where...?”

She whirled about. She couldn’t take another tackle.

“Oi!” Hiccup barked, directly at the meadow, “Toothless!”

“Not too loud!” Astrid hissed, but she followed his hard stare to the Night Fury slinking deeper between broken hedges of witchwood.

“You were screaming not too long ago,” Hiccup bit back, not taking his eyes off the dragon. “Ah, damn, he’s all wound up now,” he grumbled. “Toothless, get back here—it’s too light out for this!”

The dragon continued to ignore him—just a flick of a tail, a ridge of spines, breaking through tall grasses—and Astrid found herself agreeing with Hiccup’s single-minded concern. The dragon’s dark
hide stuck out against the sea of green-grey.

She took a step towards the hills.

“Want me to go after him?”

“No,” the response came in a grunt and Astrid turned to see Hiccup crawling back towards his prosthetic. “He might have sensed somethi—oh, here he—oh—that—okay. Yep.”

Astrid spotted Toothless’ return. He bounded forward, grass clinging to his wet nostrils and the corners of his gums. He dropped a mouthful of it at Astrid’s feet, clumps of thick-bladed grass bound by saliva.

“Oh...”

Toothless stooped to sniff it. Then lifted his head to sniff her, ruffling the hair at her neck.

Astrid leaned back, patting his cheek.

“Thanks? For the grass?”

She looked to Hiccup for help. Every time she thought she had the dragon figured out he went and got weirder on her.

Hiccup looked at Toothless rather warmly, hardly paying attention to the pant leg he had been twisting around his stump.

“I think he’s apologizing,” he said.

Astrid drew her toe away from the goopy greens. “With grass?”

“Oh... ready to continue the lesson? Dragons love this. I don’t think it matters how angry they are, this stuff’ll stop them in their tracks.”

Toothless thumped his tail on the ground and yammered. His jaws—with teeth retracted—opened and closed and he made noise as though he were trying to talk.

“Right?” Hiccup laughed.

Astrid snorted. As if he could understand.

Toothless puffed, shook his head with flopping earfins, and nudged the slimy pile at Astrid again.

“Toothless, that’s so nice of you to share,” Hiccup said fondly. “But Astrid doesn’t need it. You can have it.” He gave Astrid an encouraging nod.

“Ah-uh, yeah,” she agreed. “You have it, Toothless. You won before.”

Astrid took another step back from the pile and that’s all Toothless needed to pounce on it. He circled the mess with deep huffs and flared nostrils.

“I haven’t figured what exactly’s in it that makes dragons go nuts—” There was undue effort in Hiccup’s words and Astrid realized he had been tucking his leg back into the prosthetic. He was going to stand.

Astrid sat down at his side. She didn’t know what possessed her to other than some unvoiced plead
to keep him from getting up. The nap he had earlier, all the laughing he had done in the past few moments, hadn’t erased the purple creeping under his eyes. It hadn’t made her forget the stark contrast of his freckles against near bloodless cheeks.

So she took a hurried seat in the dirt, the half-eaten pile of berries at their backs, and watched the Night Fury play with a pile of grass. She didn’t look at Hiccup as he settled back on the ground. She didn’t give any indication of being pleased. He wouldn’t have appreciated it then.

Instead she focused on Toothless, who had gone from sniffing the grass to rubbing the top of his head on it. Which then turned into a heavy back flop—drawing a compulsory gasp from her lips and another chortle from Hiccup.

Toothless writhed on his back, belly exposed, grinding the grass against his neck as though he could absorb it through his scales. His purr rolled louder than a rusty crank. Every now and then he would pause and look at them, thump his tail on the ground, and return to his wriggling.

Astrid could see the apple of her own cheeks crest her vision and knew a smile crossed her face, even if she couldn’t quite feel it.

She shook her head. “I never thought I’d be sitting here watching a Night Fury act like...”

“Fiddlesticks?” Hiccup finished.

An image of a matted, ear-tattered tom cat sprung to mind so clearly, so suddenly, that Astrid couldn’t believe she had forgotten him.

“That’s right,” she said, turning to Hiccup. “You had a cat!” It was such a weird animal to have on Berk too. They were more for mainland households. But then, the weird son of the chief got to have weird pets. She often saw the cat in barn rafters and napping near cattle in the winter. “Whatever happened to him?”

“Same thing that happens to everything on Berk.”

All traces of laughter had gone from his voice, and with it, Astrid’s smile.

“Dragons?”

“Me.”

“You—what?”

Hiccup didn’t look at her. He watched Toothless for a moment, mouth twitching with an uncertain explanation.

“I let him out during a raid,” he settled on. “Dragons were just being dragons.”

He turned his unfocused stare to his leg, fingers playing with fingers. Astrid saw anger in his profile. She couldn’t tell if it was at his past or his present self.

In an unconscious movement that nearly shocked herself, Astrid reached out and placed an hand on his arm, stilling the twisting digits.

“There won’t be any more raids, Hiccup.”

He flicked an eye on her touch, then her, then back to his leg. He nodded. She saw him swallow, the sharp bones of his neck jumping.
“You’ve already done a great thing for Berk,” Astrid continued. “For the world. For dragons, even. I mean... they were basically slaves to that thing, right?”

He nodded again. Some of the anger softened, but his gaze was unfocused.

“Yeah. Yeah, thanks.”

A moment passed where he observed her hand on his arm. Then he gently pulled it from her reach, put his weight overtop his foot and his peg leg, and rose to unsteady footing.

“Don’t—”

“I just gotta move around.”

Astrid swallowed back every caution about how he may be feeling or what she would prefer he be doing, knowing it would only add to whatever aggrieved him.

Instead, she held her palms up, and returned to watching the one member of their group who seemed, in that moment, free of burden and worry.

Twilight struck, and it felt uncomfortable. All of it. The shade of the sky. The final, orange outline of the hilltops. The darkened treetops. The trilling meadow.

Astrid tried not to think about exactly a day earlier—the sick terror—but the thoughts were already in her head.

“Ready bud?” Hiccup called. Toothless trotted over and made a noise that sounded like a cross between a meow and a roar.

“Fed? Rested?”

Toothless reowed again.

Hiccup nodded, apparently satisfied, and turned to Astrid.

“Let me check the tail and we’ll be off.”

Astrid pulled her hair back only to find she had nothing to tie it with and little to do so if she did. Annoyed, she watched Hiccup bend to Toothless’s side, crossing her arms against the oncoming chill.

Hiccup gave the frayed, leather straps a couple tugs and nodded. “Seems to be holding up. This should definitely bring us to Berk.” He remained on his knees, hands planted on his thighs. He looked back. “Ready, Astrid?”

Astrid considered him for a moment. “Why don’t I do the tail thing today?”

Hiccup gave her a look of hilarity.

“No.”
Something about the combination—a smile and denial—reminded her bluntly of Hackett’s reaction to when she first claimed to be a warrior. Anger swept in, immediate and frighteningly easy.

“Why?”

Hiccup only blinked. The smile didn’t quite leave his face.

Astrid placed her hands on her hips. “Hiccup, I won’t just be a passenger.”

He pushed up, still with that odd look on his face, like she was asking something completely absurd. Toothless stared at the pair.

“You have to be a passenger,” he said. “You can’t do anything else.”

“Excuse me?”

He didn’t back down. “You don’t know this! If he had the rigging, yes, I could talk you through flying him, but this—”

“I can pick it up!”

“You want to waste time doing that? Look, I—” He glanced down. Nearly all his weight went to his good leg. His limp grew heavier by the day.

His leg wasn’t well. He needed healers. Astrid knew this. She knew her imprudence couldn’t overpower her ire.

“It’ll only make it worse again,” she insisted. She wasn’t wrong either. “I should be doing the physical stuff.”

“Ideally, sure,” he said shortly, “but you can’t.”

“I’m—,” she stopped. She didn’t know which words to use; only that she felt uncomfortable frailty in her stomach. Like she was falling with no control. It made her irritated. Antsy. “Don’t tell me that I can’t do things. I’m not useless.”

Hiccup huffed, arms dropping from the cross he had against his chest. “Why do you keep saying that?”

“What?”

“How... how weak you are and how useless you are—how can you possibly think that about yourself? You’re... you’re the strongest, most-most useful person I’ve known.”

He faltered halfway through, his face reddening.

“Hiccup...”

Again, she couldn’t explain it. She didn’t know how to handle this sense of loss she carried. Nor how to shake it. She didn’t know what to latch onto or how to move forward. She was flailing, and even with hope on the horizon, a poisonous seed of dissatisfaction—with herself—continued to take root.

She would never be rid of it.

Astrid blew the fringe from her eyes, trying, and failing, to keep them from straying to the ground.
“I know how to fight.” Not as well as she once thought. “I know how to fight dragons.” Which she wouldn’t be doing anymore. “I can’t heal people. I can’t bargain. I can’t... outsmart them. “

“Yes, you can,” Hiccup said, immediately.

“I can’t fly dragons.”

“Not this one, but others.”

“There’s so many things I can’t do,” she pushed on. “This has been...” An eye-opening ordeal. “When you were out, when they took your leg...” And they took it. She hadn’t known. They had just taken it and she was none the wiser. It was a power play that haunted her even now, rôsts and weeks away.

“You survived,” she settled on, “but it wasn’t because of me.”

“It was.”

“It wasn’t,” she said, barely more than a whisper. She met his eyes, cutting across dusk, so he would understand. “Yeah, I got you to help. But anyone else? Most anyone else... they would have died. They would have died from shock, or infection. You were sick for so long. You pulled through, even when everyone thought you were as good as dead.”

Hiccup was shaking his head. “I only got the treatment because you brought me there. You were working so they’d keep treating me.”

Astrid jolted. She remembered when Hiccup had been threatened with euthanasia.

A chill ran up her arms. Had there been additional ambiguity in wanting Hiccup dead? A greater power to hold over her in threatening his life?

It had made an innocent sort of sense before: Hiccup was a burden, seen as a wasted effort; they were strangers using up resources. Now she would look back on everything with new questions. With new perspective. The most basic of interactions tainted...

“Astrid, what happened?”

She was wringing her wrists again.

*She needed to stop.*

She couldn’t.

*She needed to.*

“I...”

Hiccup watched her, lips tight, eyes large and sorrowful and empathetic. She wished he wouldn’t. Her stomach continued to writhe, loose and weak as ever. She took a short breath and felt thankful for the fading light.

“The Lava Louts were going to get us. Hackett found out who we were. I don’t know how...” It struck her just then. How had Hackett known? Was the meeting still in effect? Who had he spoken to? What were the exact contents of the letter—

“So we had to leave just then,” Hiccup surmised.
“Yeah, they were... they knew. I was... con-confronted,” her throat seemed to spasm over the word, followed by an upwell of sickness. The skin beneath her palms started to ache with the endless twisting. “...and I ran. To you.”

Hiccup watched her and she knew he recalled her hysteria. Astrid cringed at the memory, wishing she could have kept it together. She didn’t want Hiccup to know exactly what Hackett had done. She couldn’t speak the words. She likely never would in her lifetime.

“And playtime was over.”

Astrid snorted. “Yeah, playtime was over.”

Hiccup inhaled, and nodded, and Astrid knew that he knew. He knew there was more she wouldn’t say and she knew he wouldn’t push her for it. That was all she could ask for.

“Let me handle the flight,” he said, steady. “Please. When we get home, I’ll teach you.”

Maybe it was him speaking of home—using ‘we’ and ‘when’ and ‘home’ all in a sentence. Astrid felt that flutter of hope—the same that kept her going; the same that made her vulnerable. She found herself nodding along with him.

“Fine.”

“Thank you.” Relief ladened his voice with a sort of heaviness that seemed to settle in Astrid’s stomach. Her eyes fell to his leg again as he adjusted the tailfin’s hastily constructed makeshift straps—knotted leather rather than buckles. He limped profoundly; all the weight had been shifted to his good leg, even as he lowered himself to the ground. His fingers worked, bone-thin and pale. His shoulder blades upheld the tunic falling against his back.

“I’m thinking that maybe I should keep Toothless hidden first,” Hiccup said as he worked, and the mere sound of his voice had Astrid’s attention jumping elsewhere, “make a new saddle and tail rigging, and then tell everyone? You know... just in case there’s a bad reaction?”

But how long would that take? Astrid wondered. How long before they were let out of anyone’s sight?

And that’s if Hiccup was even well enough to work in the forge by the time they got home.

She couldn’t let herself worry over the trials that would surely follow their return. There was too much now—too much in their immediate future left before she had the luxury of moving on with nuanced concerns.

“I’m not saying I’ll run away or anything,” Hiccup added quickly at her silence. “But Toothless is the priority here.”

Astrid shook her attention to the present.

“Getting you home is the priority,” she corrected.

For Freya’s sake, it’s what she’d been killing herself over for the past couple months. Return the heir. Save Hiccup.

She looked at Toothless, his head level with her shoulder, those large, intelligent eyes reflecting colorful remnants of the sun, and gave his chin a good rub.
She couldn’t deny Toothless was a priority either. Somewhere along the way, his safety mattered to her as much as anyone’s.

There had been a river. A little farther north than the course they had plotted but the water had been well worth it. They quenched their thirst and filled their bellies until they cramped. They wiped their mouths on threadbare tunics, took turns relieving themselves, and readied to set off once more. Astrid straddled Toothless’s neck with Hiccup’s prosthetic tucked under her arm, Hiccup arranged himself to position the tail, and together the three of them took to the skies.

The recent ascensions weren’t nearly as frightening or steep without the cage of trees and pursuers, but the air was just as biting, just as thin, as the night before. More so, if Astrid were to gauge. The winds had augmented, screaming at her ears with shrill cold until they felt aflame with raw chill. She spent nearly as much time looking backward as she did forward, knowing that whatever discomfort she suffered could be nothing compared to Hiccup’s.

Before it was the irrational fear of being followed that kept her flight alive with terror. Now it was the injured boy keeping them airborne at his own expense. The memory of his enhancing frailty overlapped the four-limbed wrap he had over Toothless’s tail. One arm always held the tailfin out, flat. No rest. No hiding from the cold.

The vision of him losing consciousness as his sickly body gave out, of them plummeting to Midgard below, tormented Astrid. She forced her mind to the gods, thick wispy clouds dampening her hair, with silent prayers and pleas for protection and promises of piety should they make it. She focused on landmarks, counting each advance as a blessing.

They passed the Puffin’s large village to their south right. Acres and acres of hilly farmland reached between clusters of homes. Sparse lumber and plenty crop. They passed smaller isles of land: some more village than beach, some more forest than village, and most of it farmed.

Then came the sea and Astrid turned all her focus on never losing sight of the dark, dark mass in the distance that she knew to be their next terrain. The water below blinked at them under the passing clouds, restless with the promise of coming storms. Astrid hugged the prosthetic to her chest, metal denting her flesh, just to know she still had it. Her fingers had gone completely numb. Her cheeks stung.

They rounded the long beaches of Bashem. The densely populated town that—unlike the Puffin Isles—seemed to merge with the forests rather than clear it, quieted, light-by-light, as sleep took over.

The village crossed much of the island, tapering off and filling, rising, with trees as the lands stretched into uninhibited rock and mountain.

Astrid directed them over the highest peaks. The tall range had deep depressions—paths, likely—but no village on the other side. Just a short span of remaining timberland before it dropped into a cliff, soft sediments and orange rock that melted into Bashem’s infamous Oyster Beds.

“Here, Toothless,” she said to the dragon’s ear, hopeful of certain privacy with the blockade of mountains. Then she repeated the command louder to Hiccup, though she swore the words that left her mouth couldn’t be heard as clearly as they resounded in her head, swallowed by the howling
cold.

He must have heard her, for they circled down into clearing between trees, far enough from the
cliff’s edge, a good walk from the mountain paths, and made a jerky drop to the ground.

Astrid’s nose was numb. She kept sniffling and rubbing it, trying to bring some life back to her face.
She couldn’t feel her fingers or her feet. She felt thirsty again—as though the cool taste on her tongue
had only seeded a stronger desire for it—but her exhaustion was stronger. She slid off Toothless and
stumbled to Hiccup, who had gracelessly rolled off the tail and remained on the dirt and leaves,
drawing deep breaths.

“How are you doing?” she asked, refraining from throwing herself into a panic. “How are you doing?”

“I’m fine,” he groaned.

They hadn’t the moon and stars of yesternight but Astrid could still see his skin against the dark
ground, like white-blue bones. She stumbled over their distance and crouched, touching his arm.

“You’re freezing!”

He grunted, clenching his eyes shut. “So are you.”

Astrid couldn’t feel her arms. She touched the bare skin of one and only registered pressure. Gods,
what she wouldn’t give for a set of furs. For a long-sleeved tunic.

Even at ground level, Astrid couldn’t discern much difference in the air. Except, perhaps, a
thickening. The sort that could cloud a mouth just before rains.

She craned her neck back at the sky, unable to make out any stars at the moment. At this temperature
the threat of rain would turn to snowfall soon.

They had to get home.

“I’ll start a fire,” she announced, pressing a hand to her thigh to help push up. “You rest.”

Hiccup, still spread-eagled on the ground, held out a hand.

“Give me my leg.”

Astrid only saw a starkly pale claw. His eyes were dark and set, and the skin around them just as
hollow. Her gaze danced down to the limp fabric of his left pantleg, no longer tied, no longer cupped
by a peg leg. An uncomfortable vacancy.

She kept her hold on the prosthetic.

“Stay there,” she said, taking a step back, “with Toothless. I won’t be—”

“Astrid.”

His voice cut her. The tone like her father’s. Like Stoick’s, the way he would say Hiccup’s name
when the boy wasn’t listening.

Hiccup sat up, and Astrid felt the leg leave her hand before she thought to draw it back.

“Don’t put it on,” she ordered, desperation tailing in a whisper. “Just… stay by Toothless. We’ll
make quick work of this. We’ll have fire and… just rest.”
Hiccup ignored her and went about stuffing the extra fabric into the cup.

“Hiccup, please!” she begged. “You wouldn’t let me help fly—“

“You did help,” he snapped, “you navigated—”

“The hard part!” she barked. Her voice bounced in the quiet trees and she drew a breath.

All three of them stayed silent, waiting...

Astrid released the air, feeling it shudder over her tongue.

“Stay,” she continued, “by Toothless—“

What was she doing? Astrid changed tactics. She turned to the dragon. “Toothless, keep him here.”

“Astrid—” Hiccup started, his tone warning.

“You can count to one hundred,” she interrupted, “and if I’m not back and sleeping by then, then you can help.”

Astrid turned and ran without waiting for an answer, further into the forest without care for direction. She bent in the dark, squinting under the light of whatever star could escape the heavy cover, and reached for any remotely dry wood she could find—thin sticks and sharp, fallen branches, her fingers, cold and clumsy, struggling to keep hold of everything she found. She knocked her knuckles against rocks, against roots, with nicks and light bruising blooming across her hands.

It didn’t have to be pretty. It just had to hold a flame, and fast.

She was pleased to find Hiccup still on the ground, now nestled against an alert Toothless.

“One-oh-eight,” cut the dry greeting through the dark.

Astrid dropped the wood over an arm’s-length away from where his feet might have stretched to were they not curled up to his chest.

“Liar,” she said.

He snorted and said nothing more as Astrid made quick work of setting her meager collection into anything that could maintain a fire while she could still move her fingers. The lack of light frustrated her, forcing dependence on senses the night had long since numbed. She only just remembered to brush a clearing around the wood before she stepped back, the bleeding back of a finger in her mouth.

Without any further prompting Toothless blew life into the ramshackle and rather embarrassing tower.

Their small, hasty camp came alight with blessed heat. Heat that cupped Astrid’s cheeks and sent hammers pounding at her fingers as she held her palms towards the flame.

She looked across it. Hiccup was drowsy eyed and bare white against Toothless’s hide, like a bloodless corpse. He seemed as thin and frail as he had been on that bed months ago. Like he was moments from death.

Like he could fall asleep against Toothless and never wake up again.
This couldn’t happen. She would never allow it.

Astrid curled her fingers against her palms and stood. She walked around the fire, taking small comfort in the complete silence of the night, and crouched down to nestle herself in between Hiccup and Toothless’s hind leg.

The dragons seemed to read her movements, and lifted his tail to allow her to join the bed they made.

“What are you doing?” Hiccup asked, his voice tilted with bemusement.

“You’re too cold,” Astrid muttered. She wiggled down, settling, pressed deeply against Hiccup so that she could feel the shivers running through his body.

Thor Almighty, she wished for a blanket. An extra strip of cloth even.

“We need to take turns watch—“

“I’ll stay awake,” she promised. “I’ll listen. You did the hardest part, you need to sleep.”

Her hand went behind her and patted Toothless’s side. She felt she had to. She had to acknowledge that he, out of all of them, had likely done the hardest part. Then she let it rest around Hiccup’s shoulders, the ball that he had become.

He didn’t shake her off. He didn’t move closer either. Nor did he stiffen at her half-hold. He trembled too much to do much else.

“You don’t have to,” he mumbled.

“Just sleep,” she said. Her legs curled up, much like Hiccup’s had, and Toothless’s tail came around to embrace them both.

The wetter wood popped. Invisible smoke rose. The smell warmed Astrid just as much as the heat. The trials of flight melted away under the ambiance of fire and the sense of safety and their huddle of bodies, even though Hiccup was sick, and feverish, and drifted off too easily at her side with his cheek on her shoulder and an unusually warm forehead against her jaw.

She struggled to stay awake, as she promised, for as long as she could. Hiccup breathed lightly across her chest. His shivers slowly abated. The movements of flame pulled her.

Astrid didn’t stay awake. Toothless had. Somehow, she knew he would.

She only needed a few hours, anyway. Just to recover from the night. She could rest more during the day, under the warmth of the sun...

Chapter End Notes

Once again, a GINORMOUS thank you to Jenna-sais-pas who has been a marvelous and patient beta for this story. There are no words!
Chapter Summary

An odyssey comes to an end.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You snore.”

“I do not!” Astrid snapped, adjusting the waist of her trousers.

She did. She knew she did. Her brother often told her. So had Ruffnut the one time she found Astrid napping under the shaded awning of a side-shed.

Hiccup sat against the half-turned belly of a slumbering dragon, brushing his fingers through the tangle of his hair, which wasn’t much shorter than Astrid’s.

“Fine,” he said, disbelieving.

He looked better than he did the night before, though not by much. He maintained a sickly pallor, with lips whitening even when they weren’t pursed in discomfort. He moved very little, as though his body were burdened and locked with an exhaustion a full night’s sleep couldn’t shake.

Rather than say anything, Astrid sniffed and moved around on her own aching legs. She’d awoken stiff and pressed against Hiccup, with her knees locked up and her neck bent at a weird angle, and Hiccup’s bony limbs digging into her thigh and side. The body heat had balanced out the discomfort, in the end, and they hadn’t frozen through the night.

The chill, however, remained—sewn into the surface of her skin, leadening her joints, leaving her sluggish. She needed a shock of energy. She needed to moisten her dry throat and quiet the spasming complaint beneath her ribs. If they were to pull it off one more time—another flight through the night—and be ready by sundown, they needed to rejuvenate.

The rising sun hung over the edge of the forest, its warmth dulled by clouds but still bright enough to cast the mountains behind her in hues of bright green. Still bright enough for Astrid to shield her eyes as she faced the sea and tried not to think about their upcoming tour across it.

She knew water wasn’t far, only thirty feet below after a stiff drop from the cliff, salted and green. She knew most of the available food was down there as well—Bashem’s infamous Oyster Beds, for one. She knew they didn’t have the strength or resources to make the descent to those beds, nor the trek back through the mountains, down to the northern beach and around to the Beds as most Vikings reached them.

She knew if she stepped to the edge of that drop, out from the safety of the woodlands, she’d likely see several Vikings collecting on those Beds. And ships not far into the sea. She couldn’t imagine the Beds were ever truly empty of human life save for the night.

Which they could always wait for…
Her stomach protested at the thought. Astrid pressed the heel of her palm against the grumbling organ and felt the vibrations.

The forest was more tree than anything else—few bushes or vines to pluck berries from. Small animal was their best shot at a meal, and it might have to be a half-crunched squirrel caught by Toothless...

Astrid glanced at the dragon, who snoozed away on his side, stretched out with his chin flat against the forest floor and his tail reaching opposite. He didn’t seem aware, or to mind, that he had Hiccup loosely tucked against his chest, a paw unwittingly curled over the boy’s lap, as though Hiccup were a human slumber-doll.

In spite of everything, Astrid smiled.

Toothless deserved the rest. He might help them find food later, but until then Astrid supposed she could set up a couple traps and hope for the best. Or she could venture towards the mountain paths and see if there were any berries.

Traps and berries.

“Okay,” she huffed, not liking the ghost of breath she could see in the morning air. “I’ll go try to find something.”

She didn’t need to say, “stay with Toothless”. Hiccup seemed past the act of pushing his body.

“Got the knife with you?” he asked.

“Yeah—,” she lifted her tunic and pulled it from the waist of her trousers, “here—“

Hiccup waved it away. “No, no, you take it.” He jerked a thumb over his right shoulder, “I got this guy.”

It made sense, of course, but Astrid still hesitated in leaving Hiccup alone with a sleeping dragon and hollow pile of ash that still smoked.

He read her hesitance appropriately and some of that old, nasally deadpan returned. “No one is coming here. There’s nothing but wood between the cliff and the mountains. We’re fine.”

‘We’re fine’ is a phrase that should never be spoken aloud amidst an arduous journey. Still, Astrid pushed aside her unease and withdrew the offer.

“Alright, alright…”

She could use the knife to dig some holes, set some ground traps. Or throw, should she spot something. The weight was well off anything she used to train with, but her aim wasn’t half bad...

Her feet slowed before her task began. A long, low growl strung together, quieting any movement of wildlife. Her empty stomach seemed to ball up higher, the unease she swallowed back breaking forth in a flood, and Astrid whipped her attention back to Toothless. The dragon had awoken. His head was high, eyes wide and pupils slit, his earfins flat against his head.

Hiccup remained at his side but upright and sitting forward, just as alarmed as Astrid.

“ Toothless,” he stammered, “—what—?”

For one wild moment Astrid thought Toothless growled at her. For daring to leave them undefended.
Then Toothless got to his feet, pushing Hiccup off with uncharacteristic discare, and whatever expletive Hiccup might have uttered died in his throat as he caught sight of something over Astrid’s shoulder. Something Toothless prowled towards, his ceaseless growl growing longer, louder.

Astrid’s tightened stomach plummeted before she finished whirling on the spot. She stumbled back, eyes jumping from tree to tree before she spotted it:

Yards back, between the dull viridian of tall evergreens, flicked a tail. Thin and finned. Orange.

It emerged from its place of lurking, side-stepping on bipedal legs, its shorter forearms curling. It had a long neck, and its hide—not orange, as she first thought, but red, and mottled with grey—stretched into thin webbing around the horns around its crown.

A fence of uneven, yellowed teeth protruded from a heavy underbite. It hissed, the fan around its head rattling.

Toothless passed by her side, his growl never ending, and Astrid felt her heart calm some, even as the hair on her arms rose with the charge of impending conflict. She wondered if they could afford something like this—the sort of calamity that would wash over the well-fished Oyster Beds should the dragons fight. It could draw unwanted attention, even if they won.

They would win. Toothless was a Night Fury. He didn’t need flight to take on this…this...

Astrid squinted. She wanted to say Threadtail but she knew that wasn’t right. It was a dragon less common to Hooligans but one that she was sure she had studied years past. Perhaps in the Book of Dragons or scribbled about in a traded scroll...

She could tell by her proximate observation that it wasn’t the toughest dragon, reaching maybe nine feet on its hind legs, but slender. Something told her it had a hot flame, like a Nadder or a Nightmare’s, and Astrid’s knees loosened, ready to dive.

Hurried, uneven steps kicked up leaves. The soft grunts of breathing through pain.

Astrid had the words “Hiccup, stay” out of her mouth without ever risking taking her eyes from the dragon.

He ignored her, of-Frigga-course, stumbling into her vision to throw his hands against Toothless’s back, and working his way forward with Toothless as a crutch until he stood at his head.

“Toothless, stop,” Hiccup commanded, panting from his scramble. “Stop!”

He held a hand on Toothless’s nose and the other, almost with threat, under the Night Fury’s chin, as though to hold his jaws shut, and forced Toothless to look at him.

That low, perpetual growl tapered.

The new dragon, however, would not be so easily quieted.

“Hiccup get back here,” Astrid said, taking slow steps forward herself. She’d rather Toothless be in the front. She’d rather Toothless scare the dragon off back to where it came from.

Unless they were in its territory, which might pose a problem.

Or maybe it was hungry.

They were hungry! Maybe they could…
Hiccup held his hand out to Astrid next. He took his eyes from the dragon—like an idiot—and looked at her.

“Astrid, lower the knife.”

She hadn’t been aware that she had it lifted, angled, gripped and ready.

The dragon’s tail whipped side to side. It stepped closer, jaws opening.

“No.” Would it fire? She didn’t know the signs for this breed.

“Astrid—“

“Hiccup, you need to get out of here.”

She didn’t know if she’d be able to pull him out of the way in time if it fired.

“You need to stop being aggressive and trust me.”

_Gods, he was infuriating._

“I’m not being aggressive,” she gestured violently at the dragon with the knife and it stopped moving forward to hiss again. Once more, its headfan appeared to rattle with the action. “That is! If you’d turn around then you’d see—!”

“Then I’m not going back.”

For the first time, Astrid took her eyes from the wild dragon.

He was bluffing. She wanted to feel enraged that he would pull this shit now, but something far too cold stopped the bloom of angry heat. Hiccup’s jaw clenched and Astrid didn’t know if it was out of resentment or pain. He breathed through his teeth in audible, slow draws, and he took another step closer to the dragon. Away from the safety of Toothless and what little protection she could provide, with his back still to the hostile dragon.

“I’m not going back to—to,” he waved wildly at her, “this!”

“To me?” Astrid gaped.

_This wasn ’t the time. This wasn ’t the time for this._

“No!” he shouted, somehow mustering a volume that contradicted his appearance. Birds took flight overhead. “No!” he repeated in a hiss that might have matched the dragon behind him. “To _this_! To the-the _attacking_ a-and-and _not even trying_! You’re not even giving her a chance!”

The dragon hissed again. It’s large underjaw snapped shut with an audible click.

“You’re just aggravating her!” Hiccup went on, explosively.

The fan around the dragon’s head flared with its next hiss.

“No one wants this! Not dragons or humans—no one wants to be distrusted at first! Or-or treated aggressively! You think you might have learned that by now—”

“Him,” Astrid blurted. An utterance that came unconsciously. The fans retracted. The dragon stood in the shade of a tree so that its once angry-red coat appeared a softer purple. Astrid found that the
knife had lowered almost in conjunction with her spoken word.

Hiccup had fully turned his back to the dragon, so he would never know the bizarreness of watching his posture relax exactly in sync with the dragon’s.

“Look,” he said, and to Astrid’s immeasurable relief came closer to her, “I can’t promise you it will always work out, but I do believe it’s always worth it.”

“This is how people get hurt, Hiccup—”

“People have never really tried.”

“I’m sure they—“

“*This,*” Hiccup motioned between himself and Toothless so violently he nearly smacked the dragon on the nose, “didn’t happen by accident!”

The imposing dragon hadn’t moved from the shade of the tree, still a good several *faðmr* away, and Astrid risked a glance at Toothless. He remained steadfast on watching the other dragon and doing nothing else, like he believed the situation could be handled by Hiccup.

Their communication had always awed Astrid, but its origin was a mystery in and of itself.

“Do you trust me,” Hiccup began slowly at her silence, “when I say that its more likely we can reason with this dragon than afford a fight with it?”

“Fine. Yeah.” Her answer pulled from her mouth without much deliberation.

“Then give me the knife,” Hiccup said, reaching towards her as though she were the feral dragon, “and go make a new friend.”

Astrid snatched her arm back. “I’m not getting near it!”

Not without a weapon of some sort. Any number of things could go wrong, and she’d done so much, made it so far…

“You have to,” he said. “For me.” And once again his voice didn’t match his body—it maintained a calm assurance. A grave, strong reality.

It felt like hands on her back, pushing her towards a precipice. “What if I’m not ready? Why don’t you do it?”

If it were so simple, Hiccup could just take care of the dragon now—send it on its way and ease her into this not-immediately-necessary-survival-skill when they were safe at home.

Hiccup shook his head. “Anyone can approach a dragon, Astrid. I’m not special.” She could argue over that with him later. “But if you want me to return home—to expose Toothless to Berk—then you need to help me with his. I won’t go back to how things used to be.”

He had been going to leave. She remembered that day in the cove. The day that started it all.

Hiccup dipped his neck and looked at her with sunken eyes. “If you can’t, then *I* can’t.”

Astrid allowed her arm to fall. She spent a moment where her cheek jumped and her teeth ached and annoyance rolled through her, mostly because she couldn’t fully fault him.
She relinquished the knife.

“Thank you,” he said, gently taking the knife from her grip with cold fingers. Astrid wanted to snatch it back as soon as it left her palm. She clenched her hand instead.

“What... what do I do?”


Astrid stared at the dragon, who remained under the tree, watching her with equal wary.

“You’ll save me, right?” she whispered down at Toothless.

“You won’t need saving,” Hiccup assured her, but Astrid took more comfort from the quiet rumble Toothless answered with.

“Here we go,” Astrid whispered to herself, the gods, and maybe even the dragon, with its swishing tail and protruding teeth. She resumed the walk she’d started forever ago, her hunger forgotten.

Hiccup’s voice followed her.

“Always let them fill the space. Or... let them decide when to come to you.”

Astrid might have nodded. She couldn’t feel her head. She hoped no Bashem Vikings decided to go on a hike that morning, because her peripheral had darkened and all her attention was tunneled on the shifting reptile.

Step after step took her closer. She could see the details of its horns, the cock of its head, the spines down its tail. Thin forearms and small wings. It wouldn’t be a fast flier.

Most of its strength must have come from its jaws. Jaws that remained, blissfully, closed.

It reared up as she approached, taller than Stoick the Vast, like a silent imposition of their size difference, and stared down at her.

“So... am I close enough?” she uttered weakly, afraid to spark it into any act of aggression. “Far enough?”

*Toothless would shoot it in the face if it tried anything ... she was okay ...*

“You could get closer...” came the suggestion.

Astrid wanted to do anything else, but she took a couple more steps.

“Not so fast!” Hiccup hissed.

“There’s a pace to this?” Astrid hissed back.

“What? No. You just... you just feel it!”

“Feel it?” She was going to hit him again. She was going to walk away from that dragon and just shove Hiccup on the ground. He put her in danger—pushed her towards an unknown, angry dragon that was probably just hungry and wanted to eat them.

“You can feel it, can’t you?”
Astrid let out a bizarre, nervous laugh. “Feel what? Annoyed?”

“The calm.”

She felt anything but calm.

“Hiccup, this is stupid—”

“He felt calm because you felt calm. They… they can sense our emotions, I think. When you attack them, they want to attack. But if you’re kind…”

Astrid rolled her eyes. He sounded like a Peaceable.

But the tension of earlier had abated. She found the dragon mirroring her every emotion—from its hesitant, forward steps to the cagey, dilated, darting eyes. She imagined it sustained the same high tension in its throat and the cooling tingle of excitement on its skin.

“I’m not the one unarmed here…” she said, feebly.

“Go on, Toothless is right here. He won’t let anything happen to you.”

For some reason—even though she was in reach of an unfamiliar dragon, lost from home, and hungry—Astrid couldn’t help but think, again, of how Hiccup ever came to find this out in the first place.

Hiccup, who didn’t have the promise of protection behind him.

The sort of faith he must have had. The sort of reckless courage and hope.

The thudding in her throat slowed. The shaking in her arm no long took her attention. She’s could breathe easier.

“Just, turn your head away—eye contact is aggress—”

“Quiet, Hiccup,” she snapped.

She would do this her way.

She never turned her head. Wouldn’t. She merely lowered her eyes. Her arm extended in a loose fist.

Something skittered across a high bow, scratching at the bark. Passing clouds shifted light patterns across her feet and leaves.

Hot air brushed her knuckles. She fought to keep her arm from moving, clenched down her impulse to run, as it huffed at her offering.

Toothless roared, quick and speaking, and then a different, higher roar followed right at her face—moist, reeking breath dislodging the hair she had tucked behind her ear and wiped away the cold nip that had since settled into her skin.

Astrid quenched the shudder the threatened to overtake her posture, the overwhelming desire to lift her eyes.

Then warm scales touched her skin.

With her eyes still closed, Astrid’s fingers shifted, reaching for the nose that had connected them with
a gentle scrape, feeling the rise of a small horn, the slick scales.

A short croon responded. Encouraged, Astrid lifted her eyes.

She didn’t see orange, or red, but a rich purple head, freckled in large, blue spots, the skin of its crown frill spread thin enough to appear almost yellow. Its eyes were bulbous, the color of pale yolk, and far set. It resembled more an animal of prey than a predator, though Astrid knew better.

The dragon blinked as she lowered her hand, its pupils constricting. It looked her up and down before it stepped back.

Astrid felt something warm fill her. A sort of warmth she would have killed for the night before. Warm like the sun.

It took another step back. And another. Then, tail swishing—a calmer, slower movement than earlier, a flick at the end—it turned and jaunted back towards the mountains.

Astrid felt her breath leave her. She didn’t move, fingers tingling with the memory of a new touch. She didn’t move until the dragon had fully vanished from sight, folded wings of mottled yellow blending as well as it could with the leaves under an overcast sky.

She gasped. Chilled air swelled in her lungs, sparking a laugh.

“You did it!” Hiccup cried behind her.

Astrid turned, laughing louder, feeling lighter, running back to the boys. “I did!”

She jumped forward and hugged Hiccup, lifting him without any real effort.

“Hey!” he protested.

“Sorry!” she asked, pleased.

“I know.”
Astrid tucked her hair back behind her ears against a particularly strong breeze that rifled through the trees. The sound of the sea scraping over Oyster Beds rolled with it. A faint smell of fish and salt piqued her senses: a jerk of her stomach—hunger—and a vivid, startling recollection of the Reefer docks.


“Well,” she coughed, throwing the taste from her tongue, “okay. You sit down and I’ll go see what I can find.”

“I’m gong to stand a bit,” Hiccup responded. He had a hand braced against a tree and all his weight on his good leg. “I can’t sit all the time, Astrid,” he said as soon as she opened her mouth. “I’m going crazy.”


Hiccup rolled his eyes. “I won’t.”

“And keep by Toothless.”

“Yes, mom.”

The high from calming a dragon rebounded stronger than ever and Astrid couldn’t shuck her grin. She’d be seeing her mother within a day if nothing else went wrong.

Toothless whined.

“Oh, he’s not that bad of company,” she teased.

Hiccup looked like he wanted to make a rude gesture but Toothless began butting him away from his crutch. Hiccup latched onto Toothless’s neck, stumbling backwards in an effort to keep from getting mowed down by the dragon.

“ Toothless! What’re you—h-hey, calm down!”

It took Astrid a moment to register Toothless’ agitation and she stood frozen, watching Hiccup battle.

“I—something’s wrong,” she muttered. Again.

It was like the gods were monitoring her thoughts. She had to take a leaf out of Hiccup’s book and keep from being positive until nothing left could possibly go wrong.

“Another dragon, bud?” Hiccup asked. Toothless made a noise of distress, snorting, paws pricking at the ground and throwing up leaves. He kept looking back at the mountains.

“Oi!” The sound of another human—deep and male—shot a knot into Astrid’s throat so quickly she couldn’t breathe for a moment. “I know you’re out there!”

Hiccup swore, pushing at Toothless’s head.

“Hide!” Astrid hissed at the Night Fury. “Just hide!”

“Toothless go,” Hiccup followed. “We’re fine, you aren’t. Just go, bud, it’ll be fine. You need to hide.”

The disembodied voice shouted again and the wisps of that high Astrid had been riding—the thought
of home and peace—dropped faster than anything she could have been prepared for. She scrambled on weakened legs to the closest, thickest tree, unwilling to risk being seen if she hadn’t already been. She caught Hiccup’s eye, who had done the same several trunks away. He crouched at its roots, fingers gripping the bark for steadiness. She remained on her feet, prepared to weave around the base if she had to.

Toothless was nowhere to be seen.

“I heard you! I know I heard you!”

Blood pounded in her ears. Astrid inhaled through her nose and exhaled through a parted mouth, deep and gentle, keeping her breath as steady and silent as she could to calm her heart.

The voice was still far. The man had only heard them. Just heard them. Not seen.

Astrid didn’t dare risk a peek. If she strained her ears she could hear the movement of a body, as heavy and angry as its voice. She could hear the careless crunching of boots kicking up leaves. They stepped closer.

Her hand went to her hip and she patted the flat area.

Hiccup had the knife.

She caught his eye again. He still huddled at the base of the tree, shoulder dug into its side, both hands wrapped around the hilt of their one, meager weapon.

He nodded at her, knowing what she knew: that weapon would be more effective in her hands.

He made a slight gesture of tossing it to her and mouthed, ‘Want me to throw it?’

Astrid sharply shook her head.

‘Don’t risk it!’ she mouthed back with voiceless exaggeration.

Hiccup frowned at her and leaned forward. He, at least, seemed willing to risk getting spotted, with recklessness borne from a lifetime of survival by the gods’ grace.

She couldn’t stop him. She had to watch, with some internal thudding dulling her senses, as he peered around the tree. A wince took her as leaves rustled under his twisting boot, as his head moved into a patch of sun so that red flashed across his hair. His face was unreadable, and it wasn’t until he settled back that Astrid felt the knot in her chest ease.

He shrugged. ‘I don’t see anyone.’

Then he made the tossing gesture again.

Astrid shook her head more violently. Hiccup pursed his lips and gave her a wide-eyed, intense stare. His weight shifted to the ball of his foot. He was going to try it anyway.

Astrid held up a finger before he could do anything and glanced to the side.

The noise had stopped. All of it. The stomping approach. The cracking twigs. The shouting.

They waited, keeping each other’s gaze.

“Grout!”
Astrid hadn’t meant to huff loudly through her nose, but the immediate relief forced the reflex. The man wasn’t near. The echo of rock and tree made his precise direction indiscernible, but he wasn’t close to them. And he wasn’t moving closer.

“Grout!” He called again. Angrier. “Don’t make keep chasing after you!”

Astrid watched Hiccup lower the knife and settle back against the tree.

“You get your ass back home, yeh hear me? YEH HEAR ME? Before noon!”

Hiccup’s eyebrows rose. He grinned widely at Astrid.

“I will whip your hide raw, boy! ’Teach you to steal from me!’”

’Someone’s in trouble,’ Hiccup mouthed, shaking with silent laughter.

Astrid still hadn’t recovered from the wholly unpleasant startle, yet she found herself mirroring his shit-eating grin. Astrid lifted a hand to her mouth to keep from giggling too soon.

“I heard yeh out here!”

The crunching resumed. The sounds bounced between tall trees so well that, for one frightening moment, Astrid feared he had continued on his way. But it grew fainter, and fainter.

Hiccup peeked first.

“We’re good,” he whispered. He picked himself up more by the strength of his arms than anything else, hooking his fingers in bark.

Astrid stepped around her hiding spot and scanned the area. At best she could see the hazy outlines of overlapping trees, all merging into a green-grey background. Small claws skittered aloft. A pair of feathered wings flapped from a tree. The forest resumed.

She crossed her arms and muttered, “I’ll feel safer when Toothless is back.”

“Yeah,” Hiccup agreed, frowning and looking around him as he searched for his dragon.

Astrid stuck close to her own tree, finding more truth in her words than she was comfortable admitting.

“Still,” Hiccup said as he scanned the area. “That was pretty funny.”

“It was scary at first.” Astrid wasn’t embarrassed to admit. They both panicked. They both had come to expect the worst of a situation.

“Poor Grout.”

Astrid snorted. “Sounds like Grout had it coming.”

“Do you think...” Hiccup’s voice had gone low, traces of scraped up humor drowning, and Astrid watched him slink back against the tree, tension bunching in his shoulders. “Do you think Grout is out here? He was chased out here, wasn’t he?”

It took Astrid a moment, a couple blinks of her eyes.

“You mean,” she started, stepping quickly to stand by Hiccup, “if Toothless is still gone then—“
“Then there’s another human in these woods,” Hiccup finished.

Before Astrid could work up another round of apprehension she felt the dry hilt of the dagger shoved in her hand.

“Take it,” he said. “In case.”

“Yeah,” the word came faint. She drank in her surroundings hoping for a black tail rather than—

“Bud! Hey!”

Hiccup’s voice bellowed in her ear and Astrid’s first instinct was to slap a hand over his mouth.

“Are you inss--ugh, Hiccup, we were just hiding from humans!”

Hiccup ripped her palm off like a dried bandage.

“Sorry,” he breathed, smiling like he never even comprehended the word.

A familiar woof at her back confirmed what she already knew, and she turned to see a pair of glassy, green eyes, large as her fists, reflecting a black web of branches and leaves.

Astrid would never admit to the absolute joy she felt in seeing a dragon right behind her.

Hiccup pushed past her, hobbling right to Toothless’ head and taking the heavy chin in hands.

“Alright?

“Yeah, Grout’s probably somewhere in Bashem,” Hiccup said, giving Toothless a good scratch along the neck. “Toothless would sense him, wouldn’t you bud?”

Toothless’s tail flourished, dragging through frond. He gave a dull roar and nudged Hiccup so gently he might have been made of glass.

Hiccup smiled. “Okay, now that we had our fun, I’m going to take that seat.” With a grunt of discomfort, Hiccup plopped right down where he had been standing. Toothless followed, padding his paws out in front of him until he lay side-by-side with his Viking.

Astrid stared at the two, hands on her hips.

“And I’m going to find some food,” she announced.

“Astrid, wait!” Hiccup said before Astrid could get a move on and Astrid knew any hope of a breakfast slip away.

“What?”

Hiccup twisted his prosthetic off with a whispered hiss and a sigh.

“I was thinking…” He hesitated, rubbing the skin of his calf through the loose pant leg. “Want to leave earlier?”

“Earlier?”
He nodded. “We don’t need to wait until dark. We just need to land in dark. I figured that—”

“Do you want to get shot out of the sky?” Astrid asked. She couldn’t have it end like that. Not after everything.

And Hiccup, with his half a leg, sunken skin, and red-rimmed eyes... he didn’t look like he was ready for another journey. Maybe paranoia had taken hold; maybe it was the triggered excitement that had her always waiting for the other boot to drop.

Hiccup gave a slow shake of his head. “Who’s going to shoot us? We’re on a cliff— we have one way to go. If we time it … well, it’ll take hours still, right? If we leave in the late afternoon we should get there just after sundown.”

“And any passing ships—“

“Astrid, if we go high enough, they’ll never be able to hit us. They won’t hunt us down. Toothless can fly faster than any ship.”

“True…” She chewed on a nail. So long as it was dark when they neared Berk, they would—should—be fine. There were no villages in between Bashem and Berk, not on their route. And ships shouldn’t be a problem… it was overcast so they wouldn’t stand out quite so much...

But being spotted had never been her biggest fear when it came to their travels.

Hiccup cocked his head. “I thought you want to get home as soon as possible?”

“I do!” Astrid said hurriedly, pulling her thumbnail out of her mouth, “I just…”

Don’t look at his leg. Don’t look at him.

She did both.

Hiccup pulled that grimacy pouty face he often did and Astrid winced, rushing once more to speak. “How are you feeling? I mean, really?”

“I’m fine,” he deadpanned.

“I know you’re fine,” she resisted rolling her eyes as she said it, “but this next fly is going to be our longest.”

“Actually, it’s not.”

“Well, longer than the last one.”

He opened his mouth and Astrid cut him off. “There’s not going to be a place to land. It’s rough conditions, Hiccup. A storm’s coming, it’s cold, and windy, and if your body gives out mid-flight then we’ll, I, I—I won’t be able to build another raft. And Toothless…”

The dragon flipped between them during their conversation, ears perked and attentive.

“Waiting until night isn’t going to make it any easier, Astrid,” he said softly. The fingers kneading his calf had slowed to a stop at some point. They now rested on his leg, sharp-knuckled and long, a slight tremble to their ends.

“But you might find it easier if we leave later,” Astrid countered, just as gently. “Last night was hard on you Hiccup. Yes,” she said strongly to what had begun as a negative gesture. “And it’s only been
a few hours, really. If we,” she swallowed, “if we have to wait another day we can. We will.”

“No. We’re not waiting.” He lifted his head and put on a mostly genuine smile. “I’ll rest now. That’s all I’ll do until we fly. Rest. Toothless can vouch for me.”

Astrid stared at him, feeling as though she couldn’t get a read on her own emotions. She so desperately wanted to get home. She didn’t know how risky their position was, when snow would come, what humans might wander over. What dragons....

And Hiccup... He needed medical treatment as soon as possible but pushing him might bring about their end.

Hiccup held her gaze with equality even though he sat on the ground, crippled and sick.

“Astrid, I can do it. I promise you.”

He promised with sallow cheeks and shoulder bones that reached like claws under a tunic, but with the gentle sort of strength in his voice that came with his brand of confidence.

“Okay,” she heard herself respond. She got no immediate intuition in saying the word—no sense of assurance or doom. “We’ll leave earlier.”

Hiccup grinned, easing against Toothless. “I’ll start resting.”

“I’ll start finding food.”

“That guy—“

“Wont find me,” she said, even as her stomach knotted at the thought. “Promise.”

The brightest blue scraped the horizon. An unearthly orange coated the underbelly of clouded sky. The air smelled strongly of sea and the gulls sounded louder than ever, circling the Oyster Beds in the remaining light as the danger of humans receded back to their homes.

Hiccup sat at Toothless’s hindquarters, long tail in his lap as he re-knotted the leather binds. He had his bad leg curled under him, prosthetic untouched since his last jaunt having spent the rest of the day alternating between napping and picking at whatever foraging Astrid managed to bring by.

He claimed not to have much of an appetite, which did nothing to ease Astrid’s snowballing stress over their impending journey. Astrid watched him now, noting how slowly his fingers moved with the leather, as though his joints ached.

He repeatedly shook long, lanky hair from his eyes only to have it curtain back.

“Are you—“

“I’m sure Astrid.”

She leaned down to sweep a hand under his bangs and feel his forehead. Hiccup slouched, an exaggerated sigh brushing her elbow, but otherwise allowed the invasion.
“You’re warm,” she noted.
“I’ll make it. I can do it.”

Astrid kept her palm pressed to his skin, hoping to soak up some of that fever onto herself. Her hand slid sideways so that her heel padded his cheek.

“You’re warm everywhere.”

And pale. And thin.

Dread gorged her. It clogged her chest and throat and tinged the aftertaste of berries into something mordant. She recalled the night before: the horrible flight, the anxiety, and the debilitating cold.

This would be worse. Longer. Hiccup, despite his skeletal smiles and assurances, was weaker and growing more so. The air would be colder. Winds harsher.

A cold grip wrapped around her wrist and gently removed her hand from his face.

“We have to cross a sea,” she was startled into saying.

“And we will,” Hiccup said. He allowed her to take her hand back. “Astrid, you need to trust me.”

Astrid rubbed the memory of touch from her wrist.

“Over confidence doesn’t always work,” she cautioned, feeling the anxiety both spread and tighten across her lungs.

“And you need to trust Toothless. We’re going to make it.

He lifted the prosthetic from its bed of brown, crisped leaves and held it out to her.

“Now?”

“Now.”

“It’s...”


“I won’t be any stronger tomorrow.”

Astrid stared down at him and was alarmed to find such grim acceptance tightening his mouth.

“Hiccup—“

“It’s only downhill for me.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do,” he clipped and held up a hand before she could argue further. “You started us home. I’m going to finish it. Let’s go.”

Astrid’s found her fingers closing around the cup end of the prosthetic.
The winds stung tears into her eyes. She could almost taste snow; a solid and lowery weight of condensed air that rested on her tongue. Clouds consumed in whatever light. They flew through utter darkness: the nebulous waters below disturbed—peaked and crashing and utterly invisible—the squalls howling a warning.

_Faster. Faster. Faster._

Astrid found herself more afraid to stare ahead and plot their course than to take her eyes off of Hiccup. Every pitch through the winds, every dip in altitude, had Astrid bracing for a plunge. More than once she thought of loosening the hold her frozen legs had on Toothless’s neck, crawling down the dragon’s spine, and grabbing Hiccup’s ankle. Just for an added measure of security.

Just to make sure he hadn’t frozen to death.

She hadn’t the agility. Her teeth had clenched some time ago, jaw spasming in an incessant shiver. Her shoulders were drawn up to her ears with her neck seized. Even curled, she hoped her body provided some blockage for Hiccup.

All her mental preparation for the worst flight of her life and somehow experiencing it managed to trump every one of her exaggerations. The fear that they would never make it held strong. To have their home within sights only to fall from the sky—Hiccup dead, she and Toothless killed, either by impact or drowning...

Astrid nearly cried when—after an eternity—a black and craggy mass to her far right flashed white against the raging sea. Her body hadn’t the energy to elicit such a response; instead she remained a block, wrapped and bowed in her own petrification, and allowed her heart to sink into the pit of her stomach.

The Isles of the Skullions.

It had been hours. _Hours._ It had to have been. The sun had vanished. The moon had hardly lifted from the horizon—a large, yellowed orb at their backs, consumed by the clouds with the pace a snake consumed a rat.

Even so, she was tempted to stop there. She was tempted to risk death by Skullions to recuperate.

_More than halfway there,_ she self-placated.

_Well_ more.

Astrid closed her eyes and pictured the map Hiccup had confiscated. The marker for Skullions was closer to Berk than Bashem, right? Surely Berk would be visible, soon?

But Skullions themselves never approached Berk; even for their lack of flight, they weren’t half-bad swimmers and Berk was too far for them. That’s part of what made Berk so safe.

They still had a ways... a ways to go...

The gnawing cold almost felt warm against her arms. The gales could be a hymn. A black lullaby. Ice crawled along her scalp with all the itch of lice. Or the prick of massaging fingers... something in between. It could be nice. A nice distraction...

It lifted—the sensation of all touch faded, peeling away, leaving a blissful numbness—
Sharp pain stabbed the back of Astrid’s neck. She shot up, seeing nothing, feeling agony, spending a moment caught between horror and confusion before she realized...

She had fallen asleep.

She had fallen asleep.

“Hiccup!” It hurt to speak. It hurt to move. Her fingers wouldn’t lift from prosthetic she cradled against her stomach and her legs were locked. Locked.

Astrid twisted, her spine screaming, the back of her head now bearing the brunt of icy knives.

“Hiccup!” she called again.

The barely visible lump at Toothless’s tail didn’t move but Astrid swore she heard a ‘what’.

Or she wished for it.

“Hiccup!” she cried again. Working her throat livened her. Panic warmed from hibernation and vibrated through her chest, adding to the wracking shivers.

“What?”

Hiccup turned his face so that his cheek rested atop Toothless’s tail. Astrid caught his eye—barely

“You’re alive!” she howled.

“What?”

Astrid shook her head and managed to wave her arm to indicate that he needn’t mind her. She faced forward once more, throat stung with every tight mouthful of air. They were okay. They were okay.

She strained her eyes, pleading with the gods that she hadn’t accidentally led them off course. She had only rested for a beat... it couldn’t have been more than a blink or two...

Her next breath came through her nose in a steadying inhale. She had one job—the boys relied on her—she couldn’t have failed them. Not like this—

A daub of orange sparked at the edge of her vision. Then, before the extrinsic color floating through the night registered, another joined to imitate it.

“Berk!”

Astrid screamed it. She screamed it before the shadow beyond the far lights took any familiar form, sounding younger than she could remember ever sounding.

Her own joy warmed her. The urge to cry re-emerged and this time she felt capable of it.

Astrid sat forward, taking the relentless slaps of the storm as an impression emerged from the darkness. She drank in everything her eyes could take: the water crashing white against the carved pillars—visible by the lambent lights in the mouths of giant, stone gargoyles. The outreach of Gothi’s hut—a mere silhouette but exactly where Astrid’s mind knew it should be. Just as she knew the rocking ships of Hooligan Harbor. The flickering beads of patrolmen. The quiet bays of settling sheep in pastures.

Home.
“Direct me towards Raven’s Point!” Hiccup called in response, and his voice, nearly drowned out by the wind that had picked up steadily in the past hour, spurred a sob from Astrid’s throat. Such a painful relief that she choked on her next intake of frigid air.

Though loathe to take her eyes from the sleepy little village, Astrid turned in her seat.

“Ease a little left!”

They banked wide, with Astrid’s attention fixated on their home. She could see people—people she knew. Vikings patrolling the banks and closing barn doors and chasing teenagers back inside. If she strained her ears she swore she could hear the bleating sheep she desperately imagined moments before.

The heavy clouds and Toothless’s hide against the starless night saved them from being spotted, but Astrid could feast on the vision of her home as they passed it.

And then it was behind her, forest rushing beneath them in a strong current. The wind eased as they started a slow spiral downward toward an area Toothless seemed to know without her instruction. Astrid could hear the plunk of a waterfall pouring into the cove’s pond, the heavy beating of Toothless’s wings as he gathered pillows of air for a soft landing. Her stomach climbed into her throat as they came closer and closer to ground with the choppy drop into the forest. The heady spoor of damp soil rose to meet her. She smelt pine and rotted wood and the faint tang of salt air.

Toothless touched down. His wings folded neatly behind him.

Something rattled in Astrid’s chest. Feeling returned to her legs—utter weakness, as though a jötunn’s fingers had strummed her muscles for the duration of their flight.

She spent a moment panting into the night, ghostly white plumes expelling from her lips like smoke, before moving. She kept a tight grip on Toothless’s neck as she slid off his shoulders and touched her feet to Hooligan territory. She held him a while longer, breathing in the warm, oiled scales, her head bowed, until she could trust in her steadiness.

“Hiccup?” she croaked. Even her tongue felt weak.

She was in shock.

Hiccup, as he had the night before, had rolled off the tail and lie on the ground, panting as hard as she.

Astrid could hear him swallow, saw him lift a white hand and stretch his fingers.

“Leg,” he coughed.

Toothless pulled away to nose at Hiccup’s back, helping the boy sit up, and Astrid found herself left with her own strength. She stumbled forward the short pace and handed over the leg, unable to find the appropriate words for the moment.

For the time Hiccup packed his pant fabric and stump into the prosthetic cup, Astrid looked around hoping the shakes would finish with her body. She caught sight of the rock-hewn barrier enclosing the cove, its entrance as dark as Toothless’s hide. The trees were exactly as she last left them months ago, sneaking from base to base, following Hiccup with such anger spurring her heels.

She found the memory hard to grasp, her fury bemusing, impossible to draw forth. Standing in the same forest, feet pressed into the same earth, Astrid felt nothing but awe and hope, her mind filling
with self-promises that she would walk these forests every day if she had to. She would scour every inch of this blustery, verdant piece of rock she called home. She would never lose her appreciation, no matter how cold, or trying, or frustrated she became with its people.

Hiccup held out a hand and Astrid, equally wordless, pulled him to his feet...

...and directly into her arms.

She gripped his thin chest, smelling the musky, warm dew of fever below a coat of frosted zephyr. The bones of his back hit every comforting pressure point on her wrists. She held him tighter and, against the overwhelming fear that she may start crying, choked out, “We’re home.”

Then she felt him hug back. Even for his slight stature, for all the weight he had lost and the feebleness he carried, his embrace held every bit of the warmth and self-assurance she knew he possessed.

Astrid pulled away, sniffling despite her best efforts, and laughed.

Hiccup was grinning, she could see it through the starless night. Astrid could only imagine it dimmed the darkness around his eyes.

“Ready?” he asked. His breath rushed towards her in a white cloud. His shoulder shook beneath her palm, his whole body tormented in a clash of frenzy and ice.

Some of Astrid’s elation ebbed. That tail of urgency reawakened.

“Yeah,” she whispered.

Hiccup turned, giving Toothless a stiff rub to his crown. “Okay, bud, I’m going to come back for you as soon as I can.”

“I’ll probably be escaping sooner,” Astrid cut in. She threw Hiccup a warning look despite knowing the night would absorb it. Sure enough, Hiccup kept his focus on the dragon.

“Just… be careful,” he warned. “Stay away from the village until we come for you.”

Toothless’s nostril’s flared and he gave Hiccup a strong nudge to the chin as though to say “you be careful.”

“We need to get you better before you think about wandering out here,” Astrid cautioned him again. “I’ll take care of Toothless.”

Hiccup sighed rather loudly. “Yeah, yeah.”

He had the audacity to shake his head at Toothless afterwards.

“Are you done?” Astrid asked.

Hiccup gave Toothless one last pat on the head before limping back.

Astrid brushed past him.

“I’m right here,” he said, defensively.

“I know that, dummy,” she muttered over her shoulder.
She opened her arms and took the head of a rather perplexed dragon into her embrace.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “For everything.”

Toothless pushed his nose against her chest and purred. Heat reverberated through her lungs, moving her blood. That relentless grip of fear loosened and Astrid drew a deep, liberated breath.

Astrid pulled away first and laid a hand to the dragons face. She could see the smile at the corners of his mouth, the passing clouds reflected in his eyes. She could see he understood, just as he understood how important it was to be with her on the Reef Island.

Impulsion took over, something both shocking and right. Astrid leaned forward and laid a quick, meaningful kiss on the dragon’s brow.

Toothless purred again and nosed her chin.

“Oh, okay,” she said, “let’s go.”

She offered her arm to Hiccup and Hiccup accepted with both hands wrapped from elbow to wrist. He was smiling at her—tight and pained, but sincere.

Together, they moved through the forest, leaning against one another for warmth, pressing away the shivers, breaking their silence to whisper about what food they craved, how many furs they’d burrow under, the proximity of a heated bath and how long they’d soak.

The topic of their families remained untouched, even as they broke through the thicket of trees and the path they walked became packed and wide and lined with pasture and fence. Home, food, and warm beds were easy and fast-coming dreams. Parents, Hooligans, and Dragon Wars... those were complications neither wanted to take on.

Maybe with a new sun and full bellies, when they could think straight and collaborate without the immediate and mind-consuming cold narrowing their reason, maybe then they would deliberate on what to say to their families. Where they had been, why they had been there, what they had gone through...

Toothless. Dragons. The War’s end.

But right now they stood at the top of a hill, exposed and exhausted, looking down at the slow-moving village with a single-minded and desperate objective. Safety.

Few Hooligans remained outside their homes. Patrol migrated towards the harbor, peering across the southern sea. Barns quieted.

Astrid fixated on her family house. Smoke sputtered upward from a dying indoor fire.

Her parents were in there, settling into bed. Her mother’s hair would be undone and brushed a dozen times over. Her father would have his cup of warm milk to settle his stomach.

Perhaps they went to sleep thinking of their only daughter, tormented by the unknown.

Perhaps they’d learned to quiet the ache.

Astrid’s legs seized with the sudden need to run. The need to bring them peace, far stronger than any comfort desires. To immediately end their suffering.

They were so close. So close. Astrid could pick Hiccup up and sprint into the village.
And yet... they slowed.

In fact, they had stopped moving altogether, just beyond of Berk’s northern barns, Hiccup’s fraught clutch falling.

His hesitance was palpable. Astrid watched the faint outline of his profile. How he frowned. How his brow pinched. How the reflection of Hooligan torches gave his eyes a detached, glassy sort of radiance.

She waited. Snowdrifts danced around them, touching the bare skin of their arms and settling, unmelted, against the icen limbs.

Hiccup’s lips parted.

“I don’t know what to say to him,” he whispered. “I never have.”

Astrid was startled by how weird she found Hiccup’s lack of confidence.

Her hand brushed his, knuckle-to-knuckle. Then she was holding it. Fingers laced. She didn’t know whom she did it for—for him or for herself—but she was gripping Hiccup’s hand with everything left in her. Her fire. Her conviction. Her sense of self.

“I’ll do the talking, this time around,” she promised.

She felt him squeeze back, and with it came three months worth of gratitude. Astrid felt something inside her knit back together.

This was what success felt like after a string of failures.

This was what it felt like to end a nightmare.

Warm in her hand.

Chapter End Notes

The end.

It’s finished. All done. That Nanowrimo whim of a project went from 50k words to twice that.

The first and biggest thank you goes out to Jenna-sais-pas for being a patient and fantastic beta. My grammar has always been my biggest struggle and I can honestly say I’ve learned a lot from her gentle corrections. Thank you so much for hanging on with me through the year!

And, of course, thank you readers and kudos senders and reviewers. Thank you for joining me on this exploration of Astrid’s character and my own struggle through becoming a better story teller. *kisses*
The Epilogue is Up!

***NOTICE***

The epilogue to this story is now posted! It's a separate story titled *Leið: Epilogue*

I know I tricked people before seeking a beta... but now I have a concrete chapter for the people who are watching this story to read!

*Enjoy!*

End Notes

A/N: Things are slow and confusing as Astrid works through waking upon her situation, please bear with me. Again, this is Astrid's journey and will focus on her. 24 hours ago she hated both Hiccup and dragons so please do not fall under any ridiculous, false assumptions that this will turn into a romance fic. I care about these characters far too much.

A ginormous thanks goes out to jenna-sais-pas for volunteering to beta this story. Y'all would be sludging through horrendous grammar without her. She is incredible.

And thanks for reading this far, you troopers! Hopefully I haven’t scared everyone off from pressing on.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!