In a world where he never shot down a dragon, Hiccup, a young husband and father, is abducted by a Night Fury during a raid. He spends the next fifteen years in an icy dragon sanctuary until an unexpected reunion with his dragon-riding teenage children. "What if?" scenario with Hiccup in Valka's role, though it ended up being a lot darker than I expected.
Chapter 10

Carried Off, a DreamWorks' How to Train Your Dragon fanfic by Raberba girl

Chapter 10 (rough draft)

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A/N: Canon Valka is dead for real; the Valka in this story is Hiccup's daughter who is named after her. (Since young Val's circumstances are different than in my usual headcanon, she never sees the need to change her name like she does in my other fics.)

The first nine chapters are posted separately from the main story because they have too much sex and a lot of abuse. For those of you who have no plans to read them, here's what you need to know (I'm about to spoil it, so if you plan to read those chapters, go do so now!): Canon divergence where Hiccup never shoots down a dragon. Stoick & Spitelout were killed in battle at the beginning, leaving seventeen-year-old Astrid feeling like she had to take control of Berk since she was convinced that Snotlout or Hiccup would ruin the tribe if either of them became chief. Because she's female and therefore not allowed to be chieftain officially, she had to settle for marrying the chief and trying to run the village from behind the scenes. Since Hiccup was the less repulsive of the two choices, she bullied him into marrying her, despite his resistance to the idea of marrying someone who clearly hated him and only wanted to use him. Although Hiccup was officially named the chief of Berk, Astrid runs the place in actuality, to the point where everyone now openly acknowledges her as their leader. HiccStrid's relationship has been troubled from the beginning; she was an abusive spouse (on more than one level) for a while, and even now that they've learned how to get along better, their relationship still isn't very healthy, and they're never going to have a happily-ever-after fairy tale romance. Chapter 9 ended with Astrid announcing that she's pregnant.

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It was early in Astrid's pregnancy and she had more important things to worry about, so she didn't consider it a priority to get advice from the village's veteran mothers yet. She simply started eating more and carried on with her duties as chieftain.

Hiccup was the one who frequently interrogated Astrid's mother and pretty much all the other women in the village, taking copious notes and learning how to distinguish when they were telling him useful information, when they were passing on inaccuracies due to biases or unusual personal circumstances, and when they were making things up to tease him. (Astrid soon put a stop to the teasing, since she knew that she would be the one to ultimately suffer from whatever nonsense they tried to feed her husband.)
Apparently Hiccup was the hovering type of new father. He obviously knew better than to hover over Astrid Hofferson in a stifling way, but she still got irritated when he would do things like stare at her anxiously (or, well, not her, but the tiny person hidden inside her), or make endless diffident suggestions-or-criticism-disguised-as-questions.

Something like, "You want me to get you some fresh water, Astrid?" meant in actuality, "Don't drink that ale when you're pregnant!" "Wow, you look amazing today, Astrid, so toned and muscular! You can probably cut your training short today, you are really turning me on right now," really meant, "Enough enough enough, you'll jar him too much and he'll be born early!!" Not to mention how anxious he was in the bedroom, even after Astrid got her mother to reassure him that their sexual activity wouldn't hurt the baby.

"Do you think he can tell what's happening right now?" Hiccup fretted as they made love.

"Hiccup, do you remember your parents having sex when your mom was pregnant with you?"

"No...."

He slept in her bed regularly now, though she was pretty sure it was just because he wanted to keep a closer eye on her and the baby. She often woke up in the middle of the night or in the early mornings to find Hiccup talking to her pregnant belly. "You're going to be as good-looking as your mother, and also very smart. Ten steps above every numskull Viking on this island."

She would usually pretend she was still asleep so that she could eavesdrop, her emotions varying depending on what he said.

"I'm going to make sure you don't know what it means for your father to be disappointed in you. I will love you no matter what you look like or what you do or what you say or what mistakes you make or what you suck at. Even if you burn down the whole village or lose every scrap of our food, I will never, ever stop loving you. If they hurt you, don't worry when they tell you to suck it up and be a Viking - just come find me. I'll let you hide, and cry as much as you want. You don't have to be a real Viking when it's just you and me."

One time, he said, "I will never, ever let your mother hurt you."

'What?!' Astrid thought.
"If she ever puts a single bruise on you, if she spills a drop of your blood, if she ever raises a hand against you, I swear I'll kill her. I will kill her--"

"What?" she said aloud this time, icily. She felt him freeze. "Are you planning my murder now? Do you think you'd have a chance of killing me, even if you tried? Not that you'd ever try, I know you don't have the balls for that."

There was a flurry of movement, and then she was shocked to find him kneeling over her, squeezing his hands around her throat. "I meant what I said," he hissed. "If you ever lay a violent hand on my child, I will kill you."

Astrid hadn't hit him in quite a long time, but at this moment, being pinned down and accused of an atrocity she hadn't even committed yet, a horror-fueled rage came over her, and she threw him off. He fought back (carefully avoiding her torso) hard enough that she was frightened, realizing she'd had no idea that such ferocity could be contained in his scrawny, slouching body. When that strength was aimed at her, it could not be tolerated, so she crushed him, beating him until he yielded - though even then, he gasped out through bloodied lips that she shouldn't strain herself, it could be bad for the baby. Hearing the anger still pulsing through his voice, she understood that he had only surrendered for the sake of the unborn child. Once it was physically disconnected from her, he would have no reason to hold back.

'He could poison me,' Astrid suddenly thought. 'He could cut my throat in my sleep, he could shoot an arrow through my heart....' He was no match for her physically, but there were a hundred underhanded, sneaky ways he could still make good on his threat.

After that, he was no longer allowed to sleep in her bed or handle her food. She made her own meals and banished him to the loft every night after sex (which she always took full dominance of again), kept her bedroom door and window latched, and slept with her weapons close.

He confused her with his reaction, being ridiculously kind and sweet and obliging and submissive, until she figured out that he was trying to lull her into feeling secure enough to allow him near her again. It didn't work. "Don't you touch me unless you're pleasuring me."

"You do realize that I would never hurt you when you're pregnant, right?"

"But all bets are off after I've given birth?" she challenged. "Or are you going to wait until the kid is weaned?"
"Astrid," he said, meeting her eyes squarely, "for as long as you never touch our child in anger, you will be 100% safe from me."

She wouldn't, couldn't say that she did not completely trust herself to never lose her temper around her child. "Am I supposed to just let him run wild when he misbehaves?" she said sarcastically instead.

"I will spank him if that's needed. I don't trust you for that. You can do whatever you want to me, but I will not let you harm him."

He didn't usually speak to her (or to anyone, really), so directly. There was no stammering or softening techniques, just a straight-out statement about his lack of faith in her self-control. 'He really, really cares about this child,' Astrid thought. Then, 'He loves the baby more than he loves me.' It was perfectly understandable, since their relationship had never been great to begin with and had recently taken yet another nosedive, but it still hurt.

As the months passed, Astrid grew, which was expected - but then her size started to get out of hand, and she reached a point where she felt unbelievably huge.

"Twins, I bet," her mother remarked with a smile.

"Twins?!!"

"I think you'd be smaller if you were only carrying one."

"I don't think I can even handle one, but now you're telling me there are two?!!"

"That's just my guess." Another smile. "...But I'm pretty sure I'm right."

The last couple of months of her pregnancy were sheer misery. Astrid grudgingly appreciated Hiccup's conscientious attention - she wasn't sure what she would have done if he hadn't been there every day to prepare and serve her meals (she was too tired to resist that now), massage her aching back and feet, provide and clean out a bucket whenever she couldn't make it to the privy (which was most of the time), help her bathe, and cover as many of her duties as he could whenever she, despite her best efforts, was too tired to make it out of bed in the mornings or had stop work hours early.
He didn't bother to keep it secret that he was doing most of it for the baby's (babies'???) sake rather than hers, but she was so grateful that she didn't care too much. She also started to suspect that he liked having her in his debt - he could guilt-trip her more easily now whenever they argued or she started to lash out at him. Just a hint of a reminder that he'd been waiting on her hand and foot for months sometimes made her too ashamed to keep yelling at him or to hit him when she wanted to.

One afternoon, almost a whole month early, her water broke.

At the same time the next day, she was dozing exhausted in her bed, nursing her son, leaning against Hiccup who was lovingly cradling their daughter in his arms. "Hel-lo, Val-ka," he cooed softly. "Hel-lo, pre-cious." The infant made baby-sounds and wiggled.

"Switch," Astrid mumbled.

They carefully maneuvered until little Valka had settled against her mother's breast, and her brother wailed his confusion in their father's arms.

"Sshh sshh sshh, it's okay, Finn," Hiccup crooned. "Val's turn now, sssh, go to sleep now...." The baby went quiet in an obedient sort of way, nestling into his father's warmth.

Astrid was surprised when Hiccup leaned over and kissed her. "What was that for?"

"You did good," he murmured. "Thank you."

"Mm...."

The first week was the hardest, and Astrid shocked herself by how often she wanted to kill her own babies. It scared her to find herself thinking like that, and she secretly trusted Hiccup with their children more than she trusted herself.

She felt so worthless, as if the only purpose her life served now was to feed these endlessly hungry creatures. It made her, for the first time, sympathize a little bit with how Hiccup must have felt all these years. She yearned to get out of bed and resume her normal life, but she physically couldn't, and Hiccup seemed to no longer be aware of a world outside the babies. So, much as she
appreciated his life-saving help with the children, it distressed her to know that the village, in the absence of any real leadership, was probably going to pot.

There was a raid on the third night after the twins' birth.

Astrid was surprised by how determined Hiccup seemed to be to protect his family; she had never seen him look so relatively warrior-like before. He raced back and forth, carrying the babies to the cave shelters where all the children and the adults unable to fight were always gathered during dragon attacks, then came back for her. After everyone was inside, huddled together listening to the distant roars and screams, Hiccup took up a shield and sword, and stood guard at the cave entrance all night along with some of the older children. He did not relax for a moment, and only left his post to check on Astrid and the twins occasionally.

"They're fine, Hiccup. They're just eating, AS USUAL, and in a minute they're going to start peeing and pooping, as usual, and I forgot to bring any diapers, so I'll be holding two disgusting pee-and-poop-dripping babies for half the night."

"I love you," he said warmly, kissing her and both children, then returned to his post.

Once Astrid finally recovered enough to be up and around, she discovered to her outrage that Snotlout had been spreading the rumor that he was responsible for knocking her up. She hated him so much in that moment that she couldn't even bear the thought of touching him. "Somebody hit him for me." The Thorston twins were happy to oblige.

The chieftain's job was just as demanding as it had been before, plus there was SO MUCH work to catch up on after things had been neglected for so long. There was just no time to be a good chief and a good mother. Astrid resented that she had to stop by the forge so very often to feed the babies, and was grudgingly grateful to Hiccup yet again for basically taking full charge of the rest of their care.

He refused to trust anyone with his children, even women who had a lot of experience caring for infants. He took the twins to work with him every day, settling them in a cradle in a safe corner of the shop and very frequently stopping work to tend to them. Gobber was exasperated, since active Valka and needy Finn demanded so much of Hiccup's attention and made the apprentice smith all but useless, but the older man was fond of his honorary grandchildren, and his complaining was usually good-natured.
"You're going to make a breast? For yak milk?"

"Well, basically, yeah, or at least I'll try. I just feel so bad for them, they get so hungry and sometimes they have to wait so long for mama to show up, I'd love it if I could rig a way to feed them without her...."

"And I suppose it never occurred to you to just hire a wet nurse, like a normal person would?"

"Yeah, but--"

A thin wail sounded from the corner, joined immediately by a louder, more insistent one. Hiccup instantly put down the tongs and strode over to the cradle, lifting Finn out of it and snuggling the baby against his chest. "Oh, Finn, ohhhh, oh oh oh, poor baby, I know, big guy, I know, just hang on, mama will be here soon...."

The infant's cries faded to a sad sort of hum as he lay limply against his father. Hiccup grinned at the baby still in the cradle, who was flailing her arms and kicking and screaming for attention. "What is it, Val, you bored? Brother's getting cuddled and fussed over, you want someone to pay attention to you, too~?" He picked up a silver bangle and held it in front of his daughter's face, revolving it slowly so that it caught the light from the fire. Valka went quiet and stared at it in fascination. "It's cool, isn't it? So cool~?"

"Ah," Valka remarked, batting at the shiny thing.

Astrid walked into the forge. "Milk-maker, reporting for duty," she muttered.

At the sound of his mother's voice, Finn resumed crying in earnest. "Here you go," Hiccup said, handing over his son.

Once Astrid had gotten the baby settled on her breast, she said, "Give me Val, too."

"No."
It **irked** her, how firm and brazen Hiccup was. On almost any other matter, he'd fumble and whine, and she could often get her way without too much trouble. However, when it came to the babies, he would put his foot down and not budge an inch, no matter what she did or said to him. "It takes so **long** just for one feeding, and I'm going to have to come back soon anyway, it goes a little quicker if I can feed them both at once--!"

"No," Hiccup said again, no less firmly. "She'll kick him or something, and then he'll be too upset to finish, and then he'll be starving later when you're not there to feed him." Valka was usually perfectly happy to nurse regardless of whether or not her brother was on the other breast, but Finn seemed to be more sensitive than his sister.

"Fine, then you go explain to Bucket why he can't milk a male yak."

"Bucket and the yak can wait."

It made Astrid feel simultaneously angry and guilty that Hiccup never trusted her to be alone with her own children. She didn't want to give voice to that, so she complained about the other thing he'd said that had bothered her. "I have other responsibilities, I can't hang around them all the time just so I'm available the **instant** they're hungry."

"Other women do it."

"Other women aren't the chief! What do you expect me to do, haul two babies around with me all day?"

"I expect you to at least want to do the best thing for your children." Before she could retort, he added in a lower voice, "But since you can't even handle doing that for your husband, I'd be stupid to expect you to do any better with the kids."

She was so enraged that she wanted to hit him, but perhaps Finn sensed her fury, because he stopped feeding and started crying, which distracted her.

"Oh, Finn, ohhhh," Hiccup crooned, taking the baby out of Astrid's arms almost before she started handing him over. "I am so, so sorry, it's okay, it's okay, buddy, it's okay, I'm so sorry, my fault for making mama mad, I'm sorry, I won't do it again when you're eating, it's okay...."
Astrid gritted her teeth as she held her daughter to her breast. Valka yelled and flailed and wriggled, which was unusual when there was a nipple waiting for her, but she soon latched on and started sucking eagerly.

"It's okay, Finn, it's okay," Hiccup continued whispering, rocking his son soothingly. Finn hiccupped, and his father shifted him in his arms to pat his back.

"...You'd be a better mother than me," Astrid muttered as she watched. Her husband seemed to have a more instinctive maternal instinct than she did, and sometimes the babies' preference for him was obvious - like now, as Finn quieted in his arms. If the boy's mother was the one holding him, he would still be screaming.

"Probably," Hiccup muttered back, unhappily enough that she realized he was insulting himself rather than her. "Sometimes I wonder if I wouldn't be such a waste of space if I'd been born female."

Astrid sometimes wondered that, too. "...You're not a complete waste of space, Hiccup," she said quietly. "I don't know how I could do this without you."

He gave her a small, surprised smile.

They sat silently for a while until Valka finished feeding. "Here," Hiccup said, peering cautiously at his son, "I think he's calm enough now, he might--"

"Hiccup, I need to go. I'll try to come back in an hour or so."

Hiccup fixed her with a hard look, and her heart sank. "Feed Finn. He didn't eat enough, he'll be hungry again in far less than an hour."

She gritted her teeth.

"You won't be the one who'll have to listen to his screams until you come back," Hiccup tried.

Astrid thrust out her hands for the baby.
"Breathe first. Calm down. I think he can sense when you're angry, and it upsets him. He won't eat if he's upset."

'I HATE being a mother!!'

To be continued....

Author's Notes: About Hiccup's concerns: Alcohol consumption during pregnancy can cause problems like Fetal Alcohol Syndrome; unborn babies can be harmed if the mother's body temperature gets too high, which can be caused by things like fever or strenuous exercise; and in most cases, sex won't harm an unborn baby.

I have no idea what the naming conventions were for when a Viking woman married, and none of Hiccup's family have surnames anyway even in the DreamWorks version ('Haddock' seems more like one of Hiccup's personal names than a surname), so I'm just going to let Astrid keep her maiden name even though she's married now.

I looked up pre-modern baby bottles. The concept of artificial infant feeding was a lot older than I expected it to be, though it never mentioned Viking culture, and it's very possible that those baby jug things were only used in certain cultures rather than around the world. I'm also not sure about the effectiveness of the older feeding vessels, but I do know that the middle-era bottles were actually very dangerous. They were difficult to clean, so bacteria would build up and kill the babies.

*sweatdrop*

I've always thought that Astrid would be better working with older children, whereas Hiccup would be better with little ones.
Astrid continued to struggle with the transition to being a parent, but Hiccup reveled in it. Fatherhood seemed to be good for him. He was so caught up in caring for the babies and watching their little lives unfold that he no longer had enough time or interest to keep making his crazy village-destroying inventions; his ideas were mostly limited to things that would make parenting easier. He became as zealous in the protection of Berk's food stores as Astrid was, and his life seemed to have a solid purpose now, which his wife found rather attractive. His energy, the new light in his eyes, the boost of self-confidence, and the way his love for the children often spilled over into affection for her.... Astrid thought it all somehow made him more handsome, even though his body hadn't changed much.

Hiccup rigged a carrier for the twins so that he could easily walk around with both of them. He learned to put Valka on his back, where she could look around with interest at her surroundings, and tuck Finn against his chest, where he could snuggle close and feel safe.

Villagers would often stop Hiccup to make a fuss over the babies, but unfortunately, they tended to be more interested in the male than the female. Valka loved attention and would have appreciated being fussed over more, but she was often ignored in favor of her brother. Finn was more introverted, and it distressed him whenever strange, large hands would try to pluck him away from his father's reassuring warmth.

"Hey now, there's the little guy!" Huge Viking hands reached for the tiny child.

Hiccup turned aside and laid an arm protectively over his son. "Yep, this is Finn," he said amiably. "And Val's back there, you can hold her if you want."

"Just wanna take a look at our next chief here," the man said jovially. Hiccup wondered why it never occurred to most people that Astrid, who had successfully established a precedent for female
rulership of the Hooligan tribe, might continue to break with tradition and name her daughter the heir instead of her son.

"I think I'm gonna hang onto him. Seriously, take Val, she seems to like your tattoo." 'And probably wants to drool on it.'

"Come on, Hiccup, just give me the kid! I'm not gonna hurt him."

Finn started to frantically protest the meaty fingers scrabbling at him.

Hiccup crossed both arms over the boy and took a large step back, ignoring Valka's indignant squawk when she lost sight of the interesting loud person. "Please don't touch my son. You're upsetting him."

"Don't talk to me that way, Useless. I told you I won't hurt the kid, I just wanna look at him."

"I have to get to work." Hiccup tried to move past. He felt sick and furious when the man grabbed his shoulder.

"What's your problem? You know I can just take the kid if you refuse to hand him over."

Hiccup's voice was steady, but he felt hot with rage. He was surprised that the man couldn't seem to see it blazing from his eyes. "If you don't take your hands off of me and my children this minute, I will tell the chief that you were harassing her family. I don't think she'll take it very well when she hears that someone was messing with things that belong to her." Although it had once bothered him, Hiccup was now quite willing to fling away his pride and hide behind his wife if that's what it took to protect his children.

The man finally lifted his hands in disgust. "Fine, fine.... They're probably bastards, anyway." He kept muttering resentfully as he walked off, "You're not man enough to sire children, bet you're not even man enough to get it up, she probably screws around with Snotlout or that Tuffnut kid whenever she wants some fun...."

Hiccup stood for a long time, hugging Finn close and trying to will himself to calm down. Then he resumed walking, and had a bright smile ready for Gobber when he entered the forge.
"You're late, Hiccup! You run into trouble on the way or something?"

"Nope. Just took a little too long cleaning up after breakfast, sorry." Hiccup went to settle the twins in their cradle and then got to work. Valka babbled and sang in her infant language, responding to the rise and fall of the men's voices. Finn fell asleep to the sounds of hammer blows on metal and red-hot iron being thrust into water, sounds that had come to mean reassurance and safety to him, because they meant that his father was nearby.

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The twins slept in a cradle in Astrid's room at night. Hiccup continued to sleep in his wife's bed, because she decided it was a lot easier to have him close by whenever the children needed tending, and he was so absorbed in the babies that she figured he didn't have the time or inclination to try to harm her as she'd once feared.

Besides, he needed her alive and healthy to keep producing milk, and she had never even come close to acting on those moments of resentment toward her children, which were becoming less and less frequent as time passed and her anxiety eased. Hiccup took care of the babies so thoroughly and so well that her own parenting role was relatively easy.

She watched him putting the twins to bed after she'd fed them. He walked around and around and around with Valka, jiggling her in his arms and talking to her, until she finally collapsed with exhaustion. Finn, in the carrier on his back, nodded off simply because of a full stomach and his father's proximity.

Hiccup laid them both in the cradle and leaned over them a while longer, fussing with the blankets, then just gazing at them for a while. His expression was so tender, so much sweeter than anything Astrid ever saw on his face when he wasn't looking at the babies, that she felt a rush of affection for him. He was a good person. A terrible Viking, but a good person.

"Hiccup," she murmured.

He glanced up at her.

"It's been a while since we've had sex."
He sighed.

"It won't be like that, I promise. Come here, love."

His eyes widened at the unaccustomed endearment, and he drifted toward her as if she was reeling him in on a string. She kissed him for a long time, slow and savoring the way he preferred it, then wriggled out of her clothes. He smiled a little. Somehow, the order and manner of their disrobing had come to indicate the type of resulting sex, and whenever Astrid undressed first and unhurriedly, it usually meant a favorable outcome for Hiccup.

"It has been a while," he agreed, and climbed into bed with her.

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That first raid after the twins' birth was the only time they'd hidden. After that, Astrid resumed her place in the thick of things and Hiccup resumed his post in the forge, the only difference being that he kept the babies with him. When things were at their most dangerous, he felt more comfortable when they were within reach than when they were a long way out of his sight.

"One sharpened sword and one re-hafted axe, coming up!" Hiccup bellowed merrily as he tossed both weapons onto the counter. The announcement was for Valka's benefit. She was all right staying in the cradle, where she always yelled with excitement in response to every loud noise and was reassured by the upbeat tone of her father's voice. Finn, on the other hand, frightened by the chaos, had to be strapped to his father for comfort. Hiccup would wrap him in a protective covering and avoid the more dangerous tasks.

This particular raid was going badly. A Night Fury had joined the fight and was taking out the catapults one by one, crippling the Hooligans' defense.

"Man the fort, Hiccup! They need me out there!" Gobber called. He wedged a bludgeon prosthetic on to the end of his arm, seized a shield, and charged out into the chaos.

"Bye, Uncle Gobber!" Hiccup called, again for Valka's sake. "See you soon~!" He stoked up the fire and started taking over what he could of Gobber's work.
Ten minutes later, a woman rushed into the forge. "Gobber!"

"Gobber's out there," Hiccup said, pointing.

She wailed in frustration. "Then you come! It's the wagon, they can't get it going again, and no one can find Cleftfoot!"

"I'm not going out there!" Hiccup gestured meaningfully at his children.

"They'll be fine!"

"I am not leaving them."

"They'll be fine! Dragons never go after the forge, there are too many warriors around!" Then, in response to Hiccup's stubborn glare, "Aaagghhh, I'll watch them I'll watch them I'll watch them, please go fix the wagon!"

Hiccup eyed her.

"I'LL WATCH THEM! I promise, I'll guard them with my life, but please hurry, I don't even know if Gunnar's dead or alive, please GO!"

Feeling pressured and extremely reluctant, Hiccup slowly laid down Finn beside his sister. The baby screamed as his father's hands lifted away from him.

"I'm sorry, Finn, I'm so sorry--"

"HICCUP HURRY!!"

"I'll be right back, daddy will be right back, this nice lady here is going to watch over you and keep you safe, I'll be right back, I promise--"
"HICCUP GO, GO! I'LL WATCH THEM!!"

Now Valka was screaming, alarmed that her father was no longer making 'This is fun!' noises.

"I'll be right back, I'll be right back, if it takes longer than five minutes then I'll just let them rot and come back."

"Hiccup, please," the woman sobbed.

Hiccup fixed her with a hard look. "Do not leave my children's side for one second. Defend them with your life."

"Yes yes yes yes!!"

Feeling agonized with doubt, Hiccup turned away. As soon as he had vanished into the chaos of the battle, the woman raced off as well, frantic to find her brother.

The twins cried, unheard and uncomforted by any human.

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Hiccup wrenched at the fastening, cursing, keenly aware of seconds ticking by. One more try, then he'd give it up for lost and rush back to his children.

"Put your back into it, Hiccup!"

"Shut up, One-eye, I am this close to leaving this thing to the dragons."

A desperate cry pierced through the clamor. "NIGHT FURY!"

"Get down!"
Hiccup ducked his head instinctively, though he kept working even as he cowered. Chills ran down his spine at the sound of the familiar whistling shriek; he winced at the resulting explosion and crackle of flames.

"HICCUP!"

That was Gobber's voice, more panicked than Hiccup had ever in his life heard it. He jerked his head up and found the smith pointing in horror at the forge.

Which was on fire.

"NO!" Hiccup ran, barely hesitating even when he saw the black dragon dive into the building. "FINN! VAL!" he screamed as he burst through the flames.

The twins' cradle was still in its place, shadowed by a horrifying winged shape. Hiccup's heart nearly stopped at the sight of the unholy offspring of lightning and death looming over his helpless children.

To be continued....
Chapter 12

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Chapter 12 (rough draft)

A Night Fury was inside the burning forge. The twins were in the forge. Hiccup raced to save his children, bursting into the building without even glancing at the flames starting to eat away at it.

The sight of the dragon made his heart quail with horror, but he still snatched up the closest weapon and brandished it as Night Fury raised its head and fixed its eyes on him.

"GET AWAY FROM THEM!!"

The dragon began to stalk toward him.

"Yes, yes, yes, that's it," Hiccup panted, now simultaneously terrified and hopeful as he backed away. "That's right, thaaaaat's right, monster, come on over here and eat me, take your time, take your time...." He hoped that the nightmare creature would take long enough to rend him apart that someone would have enough time to rescue the children. "Come on." Hiccup was practically crooning by now, his hands shaking despite their tight grip on the weapon.

The dragon paused. Then its eyes slid back toward the babies.

"NO!" Hiccup instantly dropped the weapon and dove for his children. He scooped them out of the cradle and started to whirl, but saw a glimpse of black scales and green eyes and flashing teeth right behind him. Hiccup instantly dropped to the floor, trying to wrap as much of his body around the twins as he could, desperate to shield them from claws and fangs and fire. He felt Valka pummeling his chest with her little fists and screeching indignant "Get off me, Daddy, I can't SEE!" noises. Finn simply cried in fear and confusion at all the strange loud things happening around him.

Hiccup was trembling, waiting at any moment for the beast to tear into him, praying that his body would be enough to shield the children, that his sacrifice would buy enough time for someone to rescue them. A gust of warm breath was exhaled over the back of his neck, and he cried out. He sensed the dragon hovering above him, and couldn't help shifting his head just a little so he could see.
The Night Fury was sniffing delicately at him, nose not quite touching his body. Then its green eyes met his.

Hiccup was astonished at the change. He could have sworn that the dragon's eyes had been full of cold malice, the pupils narrowed to slits. Now, however, those pupils looked huge, the expression warmer, and filled with something that Hiccup wondered if he dared call 'curiosity.'

The dragon lowered its head toward his.

*I'm going to die,' Hiccup thought. 'Someone, save my children, someone please save my children, please, please, please--'*

A wide, slightly forked tongue touched his cheek - then withdrew.

'Did it just...lick me???'

The snout started sniffing at his chest, where he was clutching the babies.

"NO!" Hiccup shouted, shoving the dragon's head away as hard as he could and then whipping his arm back to encircle the twins. "NO!"

The dragon growled.

"I don't care! Eat me if you want, but you will not TOUCH my children!!"

Still growling, the dragon lowered its jaws toward him again. Hiccup ducked his head back down, clutching the twins tightly and tensing in anticipation of pain.

Astrid's battle-roar had never sounded so welcome to him than it did at that moment. She came barreling through the burning doorway, swinging an axe that the dragon dodged with a snarl.

"Astrid!"
"HICCUP, RUN!"

The dragon reared, pupils slitted again, a purple-white glow starting to light up its mouth.

Hiccup didn't think. He rushed straight at the Night Fury and barreled into it, throwing off its aim. Hiccup felt one single instant of satisfaction before the dragon's eyes fixed on him.

'I'm dead.' "Astrid, take the kids and run--!"

The dragon pounced.

Hiccup screamed, expecting pain and blood, but instead the earth dropped out from under his feet and wind rushed at him. He screamed again, calling senselessly for his wife.

Then his brain caught up to him and he realized that the Night Fury wasn't sticking around to slaughter him in the forge after all - it was carrying him off. He had no idea what his fate would be now, whether he'd be devoured slowly in the privacy of a lair or torn into pieces to feed dragon hatchlings or something else too terrible for his imagination, but whatever it was, the unknown of it was almost as terrifying as the fact that he was dangling hundreds of feet in midair. And rapidly ascending.

"No! No, no, no no no no no no...!"

He abruptly went silent when the creature shifted its grip on him. When his voice stopped, the silence surrounding him seemed to press in. The sounds of battle were gone; now there was only the sound of the wind, the dragon's wings, and the ocean beneath him.

A despairing sob broke from him. "Please," Hiccup wept. He didn't even know what he was pleading for, except perhaps a chance for him to fight the monster before it killed him so that he could die with honor. "Please...." Of course that wouldn't happen, he was Hiccup, nothing ever went right for him. The dragon would land and incapacitate him before he had time to lift a hand against it. "Please...."

They flew for so long that it started to hurt simply from being carried. The strain grew unbearable,
yet still they continued on, and when Hiccup was begging for unconsciousness just to make the pain
stop, the dragon started descending. Fresh fear surged through Hiccup like nausea. He no longer
had the strength to struggle, so he shouted instead.

The landing was painful, too, and he couldn't move. He had to lie there moaning as the blood
agonizingly began flowing again in the limbs that had been gripped and supporting the rest of his
body weight. He couldn't stop the Night Fury's approach, though he was confused when the beast
simply sniffed at him instead of taking a bite out of him. It licked him for a minute, then stopped
with an unhappy snort and met Hiccup's gaze.

They stared at each other for a while. "What do you want with me?" Hiccup finally asked. "Why
did you take me?"

The dragon made a noise that sounded almost like a cat's meow before taking off - leaving Hiccup
stranded on a barren rock in the middle of the sea that wasn't big enough to be called an island. "I
hate you...."

By the time the dragon came back (Hiccup hadn't been able to decide in the meantime whether a
slow death by starvation was better or worse than getting his head quickly chomped off), the pain in
Hiccup's limbs had faded to a dull tingle, and he was able to scramble back. Unfortunately, there
was nowhere to go and no weapon to fight with, so he had to just stand and watch as the dragon
approached and...vomited up a fish at his feet.

"...What, are you sick or something?"

Eventually, the dragon made it clear that he expected Hiccup to eat the fish. Hiccup took a very,
very reluctant bite, choked it down, then pushed the rest pointedly in the dragon's direction. The
dragon huffed, snapped up the fish in one bite, then lunged at Hiccup. The man wasn't prepared to
be grabbed again, and now he was once more dangling in the air. "Noooooooo!"

They flew until they approached what looked like a mountain made of ice spikes. Hiccup's eyes
widened in horror and he started struggling again, but it was no use, he had to watch as he was taken
into the heart of the dragons' nest, where swarms of the monsters would undoubtedly be waiting to
tear him to pieces.

It wasn't enough that he had to be eaten by just one dragon or even a nest of hatchlings, nope; it was
going to be the entire flock, every beast that could reach him, probably fighting savagely over each
bloody shred of his flesh. 'Maybe that just means it'll be quicker. Fifty times more terrifying, but
quicker.' He squeezed his eyes shut when the first of the swarm came into view.
Which meant that he was utterly unprepared for the landing, and he actually got knocked out for a few seconds from the impact.

When Hiccup opened his eyes, he found himself SURROUNDED by interested fire-breathing reptiles. The smallest of them was at least twice his size, the largest towered over him like a giant from legend. He was too terrified to move. Any second now...any second now...it was useless to resist, probably the smallest movement would trigger the feeding frenzy....

Any second now.

What was wrong with the monsters? Their lunch had arrived on a silver platter, yet they were all just sitting on their butts, chattering at Hiccup's black-scaled abductor like a bunch of gossiping housewives.

'Do they think I'm dead or something?? Is that why they're taking their time?!!' For a minute, he considered playing dead on purpose, but the suspense was too agonizing. There was zero doubt in his mind that he was going to get devoured sooner or later, and he honestly preferred it to be sooner. Prolonging the inevitable was driving him crazy.

'I'm going to do it. I'll do it on the count of three. Look, there's a stick right there, I'll dash for it and maybe I'll have time to hit a few of them before they rip my arm off.' He inhaled and exhaled. 'Go, Hiccup. ...GO. One, two, THREE!' He scrambled.

His fingers touched the wood, which was too straight to be natural; it must be the remains of someone's weapon. He'd had time to reach the stick and grasp it. He was having time to whirl around. ...These monsters were slow.

Armed and ready for battle, it took a few tense seconds for Hiccup to register that none of the dragons were in the process of attacking him. They all just continued to sit there stupidly, staring at him. "Come on!" he screamed, shaking his stick. "Come and get me! Come on! Come--" He shrieked and swung wildly when the Night Fury pounced at him. It snarled and angrily knocked the stick out of his hands, but before he could throw up his arms defensively, the dragon seized him and took off with him again. "NO!"

Then he saw where the dragon was taking him. He went completely limp in shock and horror and despair. "No...."
The Night Fury came to a landing on a ledge beside THE MOST ENORMOUS DRAGON IN ALL THE WORLDS. Hiccup lay there bonelessly, staring up at it, so awed at the white sea dragon's size and majesty that his horror kind of seeped away, and he found himself thinking that it wouldn't be so bad to meet his end at the hands of such a magnificent creature. Its eyes, gazing down at him, seemed to piece through to the depths of his soul. Hiccup found tears trickling down his face which were somehow completely unrelated to his impending doom.

He was quickly developing a headache. He closed his eyes and shifted, wondering in annoyance why a stupid headache had to interrupt him now, of all times, when he was contemplating the fact that he was about to get swallowed by a dragon half the size of Berk, and that he actually might not mind too much.

The headache slowly faded, and he opened his eyes again to find the Night Fury chattering at the sea dragon, who rumbled back as if they were having a conversation. Then the giant turned its (...his??) soul-piercing eyes to the human again. Hiccup buried his face in his arms, unable to bear it, then hissed in pain as the headache came back.

He didn't know how long he lay there, miserable and aching, before it slowly dawned on him that the headache felt like it was...waiting. Like there was an enormous cloud overshadowing his mind, waiting for him to...to invite it in.

'No! Go away!!' he thought frantically.

After a moment, the headache receded, as if it was sentient and respectful of his wishes. Hiccup lifted his head again and gasped when he saw the giant dragon turn away. 'It. Was. Talking. To. Me. It was talking to me, he was asking-- He wanted to INVADE MY MIND--?!' "NO, put me down!!" he shrieked as the Night Fury picked him up YET AGAIN. It was flying away with him, it would drag him into its shadowy lair and eat him now that it had him all to itself. "No, no, no, put me down, I hate you!!"

It did take him to a lair, and it did corner him in the shadows. But then it just sat there and watched him.

Hiccup, back pressed against the mossy rock wall, stared back.

After a long time, the dragon made a quiet croaking sound and started to stalk forward.
Hiccup panicked and tried to dash away, but the dragon was quicker than him and caught him, knocking him to the ground. He curled up in a ball and covered his head. He felt that huge horrible nose sniffing at and nudging him - then the dragon lay down, curled its body around his, rested its head on top of him, and exhaled in a huff.

Hiccup froze, surrounded on all sides by the warmth and weight of a dragon that had been terrorizing him for hours but was refusing to eat him for some unfathomable reason.

'...Was it really terrorizing me?' Well, it had kidnapped him, but it wasn't like it had deliberately tried to scare him or anything. Dragons were quite capable of frightening the daylights out of any sane person just by their mere presence.

Hiccup had an odd thought. 'It must suck to show up anywhere and have people take one look at you, then scream and run or try to stab you.' Slowly, he uncurled. The dragon shifted, but made no threatening move. Trembling, Hiccup forced himself to look it straight in the eyes.

It gazed back at him quietly, looking...unhappy, mostly. Not murderous at all.

"...Why did you take me?" Hiccup whispered. The dragon moved then, and he was frightened, but all it did was nudge him back against its warm hide and start licking him. Hiccup shuddered, and sobbed with frustration and terror and exhaustion.

...The dragon just let him cry. It licked him and nuzzled him like a dog trying to comfort its master. 'I'd rather grieve here in the heart of the dragons' lair than back home with my own people,' he found himself thinking.

He didn't exactly sleep, but he lost track of time, lying there with a Night Fury, sensing its heartbeat, trying to reconcile the fact that he was in the depths of a dragon's lair with the other fact that he was not currently in the process of getting eaten. He felt caught between the terror of having been dragged into a living nightmare, and the exhaustion of giving up. He almost didn't care anymore. If he'd had no babies to return to, no Gobber to say goodbye to, he might have almost felt at peace.

"Why did you...take me...?"

At last, Hiccup blinked and felt suddenly alert. He scrambled to his feet, holding out his hands cautiously when the dragon rose up too and approached him again. "Okay...okay, okay, ssshhh, it's okay, dragon, I'm not gonna...I'm not gonna run away, I, don't grab me, don't eat me, I'm just gonna...take a look out here...okay...?" He edged toward the rocky opening, his body angled toward
the Night Fury so he could keep an eye on it. It followed him, its eyes narrowed suspiciously and its nose twitching, but it didn't growl or pounce. Hiccup risked a glance outside.

It was...green. There was somehow an oasis of life inside this icy fortress, plants and....

Dragons.

So, so, so many dragons.

Feeling sick, Hiccup moaned and edged back inside again, curling up by the wall with his hands over his head. He tensed but didn't move when he sensed heavy footfalls approaching. He shuddered, still not moving as a big forked tongue bathed the back of his neck and his hands and his hair. There was a warbling sort of sound.

"I want to go home," Hiccup mumbled, knowing full well that he was probably never going to see Berk again.

To be continued....

Author's Notes: This fic would have been very different if I hadn't taken the time to write out HiccStrid's married life first. I had not expected Hiccup's marriage to be that awful, nor did I expect his experiences in his unhappy marriage to have such an effect on how he emotionally responds to the dragons.
Astrid screamed in horror, surrounded by flames and unable to believe what she had just seen with her own eyes. Hiccup couldn't be gone. He couldn't. He had been right there, he had always been there, he would always be there, he couldn't be gone. He couldn't have been stolen beyond her helpless reach, that sort of thing...never happened. She made sure it didn't. Why had it happened?!

It was so hot-- The place was on fire, her children were in danger. She had to drop her axe in order to hold them both, and she shouted again in frustration and a fear that she refused to acknowledge. She was weaponless, vulnerable, unable to defend herself while holding onto two sobbing infants....

The first person she saw when she stumbled out of the forge was Gobber, but the man was weeping and heedless of the chaos around him, she couldn't hand off the children to him. The next person she saw was Fishlegs, and though he seemed shocked and horrorstruck, he wasn't weak-kneed the way the blacksmith was. Astrid shoved her babies into the man's arms. "Take them to shelter," she snapped. "And take Gobber with you if you can get him to move." She had a feeling the older man was ruined for the rest of the battle, and the village could now afford to lose their remaining smith less than ever.

'Hiccup's gone Hiccup's gone Hiccup's gone Hiccup's gone...?!' She couldn't bear the thought. She didn't want to think at all, so she snatched up a fallen weapon and charged at the closest dragon she saw, roaring at the top of her lungs.

There eventually came a point when Hiccup decided he had no choice but to accept this strange new reality. He had been abducted, and he couldn't count on ever being able to escape. He had been abducted by dragons who seemed to have no interest in eating him. He was here in this strange place now, and maybe he would die, but it was looking more and more like he wouldn't, so he needed to find something better to do than cower.

He stepped nervously out into the light, trying to ignore his winged, green-eyed shadow. He wandered across the wide ledge, looking out at the nest - which was really rather beautiful - and flinching but trying not to shriek and run away whenever dragons came over to sniff at him and lick him and poke him with their snouts and croon at him and breathe unlit gas on him and preen his hair.
and tug at bits of his clothing.

It was bizarre. He knew, KNEW, from a lifetime of experience, that dragons were bloodthirsty, greedy, aggressive, dangerous monsters. Yet the animals he found himself surrounded by seemed like entirely different creatures, displaying a wide range of emotion and treating him primarily with curiosity and perhaps even affection.

"What is happening?" Hiccup asked in bewilderment, patting a dragon five times his size that was nudging him gently in the stomach. "Why are you not horrible?"

His feet inevitably led him to the king. He knew it was a king, this mighty white beast with eyes that seemed eerily all-knowing. A part of Hiccup dreaded getting anywhere near the gigantic ruler of his people's ancestral enemies, but another part of him knew that he was intruding in the heart of this ruler's territory, that he lived and breathed at the dragon king's pleasure, and that he would need to acknowledge his host with respect.

Enormous aquamarine eyes turned patiently to him. Hiccup immediately knelt, head bowed so he wouldn't have to look at the giant, humbling himself more meekly than he would have to any human ruler. He opened his mouth to say something, but suddenly could think of nothing to say. He seemed to shrink, miserable and strangely ashamed, until he became aware of the enormous headache hovering again.

He swallowed. He swallowed again, harder, feeling shaky and hot with fear. Then he dug his fingers hard into the moss he knelt on and whispered, "Yes."

For a long time, nothing seemed to happen, until the wait made him a little bored and he inadvertently relaxed.

"??"

Hiccup immediately went rigid at the mental contact, his breath coming short. His eyes darted up to the king, but then he lost his nerve and couldn't look again.

He'd felt it. He'd sensed the question, a feeling of confusion and curiosity and slight frustration that wasn't his. "I-- I--"
“?? Who.” It wasn't exactly a word - more like the curiosity of before, plus the wordless impression of a person. Of Hiccup. He could somehow tell that the king was asking who he was.

"I-- I-- I'm Hiccup."

"Ai ai aimmhkupp?" Those, to Hiccup's shock, were sounds, though inaudible. It was the mental replication of sounds moving through his mind like the recollection of speech. The king's next thought, however, wasn't a word, but more like an impression of dissatisfaction and confusion and deliberate patience. "Wrong."

Hiccup swallowed. This time, he tried to think at the dragon king, deliberately trying to emphasize the sounds of his name and sort of surround it with concepts. "Hiccup. Identity calling me, me. 'Hiccup.' Human call to me, 'Hiccup,' 'Hiccup' me, I answer." He closed his eyes, overwhelmed by the momentary intensity of the king's delight. The sensation quickly faded, and he realized that the king was actually holding back, trying to be gentle with him in this otherworldly 'conversation.'

"Hiccup. Sound-name for you small frightened thing compassion, 'Hiccup.' Hiccup, I greet you."

"Hi," Hiccup whispered, amazed. With an effort, he tried to give the mental impression of a return greeting. "'Hello,' come harmless shy welcome." He was tired. This form of communication was strangely draining.

"Hiccup weak rest. Safe hide dark safe."

Hiccup was aware of the Night Fury carrying him away.

o.o.o.o.o

It was so quiet. When the last of the dragons took to the air, Astrid watched them for a long time, even after they had flown out of sight. Her weapon, already hanging precariously from her limp fingers, finally dropped to the ground. She had nothing now to distract her from her grief, which surged tightly in her chest and squeezed out of her eyes in the form of tears. They slipped down her face as she thought, aching, of Hiccup. 'He's gone...he's gone...I'll never see him again....'

Slowly, feeling very old, she set about taking stock of the damage, helping with the injured and bereft, receiving reports from her warriors. All the while, Hiccup never left her mind. He was gone.
Snatched away from her in an instant, while she'd been so helpless to keep hold of him.

He had been so brave. That was the part that most shocked and bewildered her. She had spent her whole life believing him to be weak and cowardly, yet her last glimpses of her husband had been seeing him shield their children with his own body, and charging empty-handed at a Night Fury to...to save her. To save her. The children he adored, perhaps it was understandable that he would willingly lay down his life for them; yet to have risked himself and paid the ultimate price to save her, who had held him in contempt....

It shook her badly. She had seen strong men and women risking their lives to help comrades and loved ones, but she had never seen someone fling himself against such impossible odds, sacrificing himself for the sake of someone he didn't even like.

'I've been.... All this time, I was wrong about him. I...!' It was unbearable. The fact that she had lost something whose value she hadn't realized until it was already gone made the grief even more painful, so she tried hard to focus on anything that wasn't what she had lost.

0.0.0.0.0

When Hiccup awakened, it was nighttime, and he was curled up between the black dragon's forelegs in the shadows of its lair. "Nooooo, it wasn't a dream...."

The dragon croaked curiously and nuzzled him.

"Stop doing that! You are not a cute little pet, you are a vicious bloodthirsty monster. Don't you have any self-respect?" Hiccup was pretty sure the dragon wasn't actually going to eat him, but his body seemed to be slower to catch on to the idea. His heart was thudding almost painfully, his skin prickling with heat. All his instincts were screaming at him to flee or fight, but he forced himself to remain still in the dragon's embrace.

His stomach growled. A nervous tremor went through him as the dragon instantly lowered its great black head to sniff at Hiccup's belly. "D-Don't mind me, I--"

The dragon's eyes rolled back in its head, and it started to make gagging sounds.

Hiccup stared. Just when he remembered why this seemed so familiar, half a fish was regurgitated
onto his chest. "...You are disgusting."

The dragon vocalized encouragingly.

"No, okay?" Hiccup complained, finally struggling free of the dragon's hold. "I am not going to eat something that you already ate."

The dragon frowned, then scooped up the fish in its mouth and stalked. Hiccup gasped and backed away until he was trapped in a corner. The dragon's silly-looking mouthful of fish didn't do enough to reduce the menace of its narrowed eyes and low growl.

Hiccup swallowed. "I...I... At l-least let me cook it first, okay?"

No response. Of course the dragon couldn't understand him - it was an animal.

Slowly, praying that he wasn't making a mistake, Hiccup crouched down until he was lower than the dragon, which made him feel too vulnerable. 'Get a grip, Haddock, it's not like you'd be safer at full height, either.' He patted the stone floor and then imitated the sound of a Night Fury blast as best he could while sweeping his hands away from his mouth. "Fwwsshh! There, shoot! Fwwsshh." The dragon dropped the fish, staring in confusion. "Fwwsshh. Fww--" Hiccup shrieked and jerked back when a plasma bolt hit the stone right next to him.

Which was, after all, what he'd been asking for, right? "Th-Th-Thanks," he gasped out. Wincing in disgust, he picked up the fish with the tips of two fingers and laid it on the hot stone. The meat sizzled, and Hiccup smiled a little in relief.

He eventually needed another fire bolt, which the dragon provided on the first try this time, and managed to cook the fish thoroughly enough that he hoped the taste of dragon drool and cave dirt would no longer be noticeable. Then he took a bite. "Mmm. Secondhand meat cooked on the floor; yum." His tone was sarcastic, but the fish actually didn't taste too bad. He might even try this again next time, though preferably with fresh meat on a cleaner surface.

Next time?

'No. No. No. I've been kidnapped. I'm going to die. I will never see my children again.' Suddenly overcome with the full weight of his situation, Hiccup curled tightly in on himself, trying hard to
contain his grief. 'I'm going to.... Finn, Val, if I could just...I only wanted....'

More licking from the dragon.

"STOP THAT!" Hiccup suddenly yelled, jumping to his feet. "You STOLE me, dragon, you took me away from my children, don't you dare try to ingratiate yourself with me after everything you've done to me, to my people - you monster! You MONSTER!" Full of rage, he flung himself at the dragon, fully intending to fight his way to Valhalla. He struck and clawed and bit--

--for about four seconds. Then the Night Fury's roar drowned out his own, he was flung to the floor, flashing teeth descended on him, and he felt a moment of satisfaction.

But instead of ripping him to shreds as he expected, the teeth did not pierce his flesh. The dragon pinned him, its snarl hot and close, seeming to spread through his whole body.

"What are you holding back for?!" Hiccup shouted, thrashing. "Kill me already!! That's what you wanted, right?! Kill me! Kill me!" The dragon, fed up with his struggling, shook him hard in its teeth and then crushed him to the ground again. Dazed, Hiccup stared at the wall until he got his wits back, then tried again to strain free. It seemed like no matter how hard he fought, no matter how much the pressure of dragon jaws closing on his shoulder intensified, the Fury, for some inexplicable reason, kept refusing to draw blood. "What is...wrong with you...you stupid...dragon...?!!"

Obviously frustrated by his refusal to submit, the dragon planted a paw on him to try to keep him still. Hiccup kept struggling, having nothing to lose. Minutes passed, and more minutes. Fishy-smelling dragon saliva was running uncomfortably down his neck, but still the dragon did not let up.

Hiccup slowly came to the realization that they were at a stand-off: there was absolutely no way Hiccup could escape by force, and the dragon was refusing to hurt him. It was a waiting game, and the dragon would most likely last a lot longer than he could. ‘...I suck.’

Hiccup sighed, letting the fight drain out of him. He lay limply, resigned, awaiting his fate. After a long moment, the dragon cautiously unclamped its jaws, and Hiccup groaned. The blood circulation in his right shoulder had been restricted for so long, and he knew he was going to have terrible bruises from the pressure of the dragon's teeth....

The Night Fury licked his bare throat, then watched with a distressed-sounding whine as Hiccup writhed slowly. There was nothing either of them could do until the worst of the pain subsided.
Hiccup lay on the cold ground, wanting to die, and groaned in angry frustration when the dragon nudged him onto its back. "Just leave me alone! Leave me alone, why are you doing this to me, why won't you either kill me or let me go...?!

The Night Fury brought him to the king and barked up at the behemoth beseechingly. Hiccup squeezed his eyes shut and covered his face as if that could shield him from the king's thoughts.

"??"

"NO! GET OUT OF MY HEAD! GET OUT, GET OUT!!"

There was a flash of surprise and then a withdrawal so sudden that Hiccup felt a little sick. He slipped to the ground and lay on the moss, listening to the king and the Night Fury talk to each other in their dragon language, shivering as he saw curious dragons gathering around. One started to approach him. He knew it probably wouldn't hurt him, but he curled up anyway with his good arm covering his head, hissing as he sensed an inquisitive nose examining him. A roar from the king frightened him into curling up even tighter, but nothing happened except that the surrounding dragons dispersed.

Hiccup lay there for a long time, not paying attention to much except the rhythm of his own breathing, dimly aware of the Night Fury curled around him. It occasionally licked his bruised shoulder and made soft, almost mournful-sounding croons.

"You know that does about as much good as a mom kissing her kid's boo-boos better, right?" Hiccup mumbled. He suddenly remembered his own mother, who had been carried off by a four-winged dragon when he was just a baby. His eyes widened, and he sat up.

And nearly screamed when he saw a huge dragon with four wings, sitting nearby and staring at him sadly. He stared back, pressed up against the alarmed and confused-looking Night Fury. "Y...You... Was it you who killed my mom?!!"

The four-winged dragon vocalized softly and began to approach. Hiccup shrank back, then reached to pull the black dragon's wing over himself like a shield. 'I can't believe I'm trying to protect myself with a Night Fury,' he thought distantly.

The two dragons conversed for a moment. Hiccup crouched beside the Fury's warm hide, breathing hard. Then he closed his eyes and scoffed at himself. 'What are you afraid of, Haddock? That
you'll get carried off like your mom? Been there, done that. That you'll get eaten? Yeah, Owl-face there looks just as savage and bloodthirsty as the rest of these idiot disgraces to monsterkind.'

He forced himself to let go of the wing and step out into the open. He stared hopelessly up at the four-winged dragon. Their eyes met, and the dragon started to lower its head. Hiccup cringed and tried to duck away, but ended up stumbling into the Night Fury. Hot dragon breath huffed over him. He held his breath and waited.

Tugging sensations prickled his scalp, it felt like someone was combing his hair. Hiccup leaned on the Night Fury, staring unseeing at its shining black scales, trying to wrap his head around the fact that his mother's killer (maybe) was preening him. 'Maybe the Thorstons slipped some weird mushrooms in my soup and this is all just one giant hallucination...?'

The Stormcutter finally sat back and made a satisfied noise, and Hiccup cautiously reached up to find his hair damp with dragon saliva. "Uuuuggghhh...."

To be continued....
Chapter 14

*Carried Off*, a DreamWorks' *How to Train Your Dragon* fanfic by Raberba girl

Chapter 14 (rough draft)

Astrid was able to nurse her daughter while walking around doing her duties, but Finn pitched a fit when she tried the same thing with him. Her nerves were too frayed by that time to attempt feeding him in quiet privacy, so she found Ratnest, another nursing mother, and asked her to feed the boy instead.

Everyone's constant inquiries about Hiccup were driving Astrid crazy. "I am still your chief," she said harshly at one older man's insinuation about her legitimacy as Berk's ruler disappearing into the night along with her husband. "The law was changed months ago, I have every right to continue ruling."

"That 'law' has never been approved at a Thing, you can't--"

"The Thing hasn't had jurisdiction over us in years," she snapped. It suddenly occurred to her that, now that Hiccup was gone, the Hooligans had no more reason to be excluded from the rest of the Viking community. She hoped that the man she was arguing with wouldn't think of this, even as she wondered wildly what this could mean for future politics. Was it worth seriously risking her position of authority to attempt to re-establish ties with the other tribes? "And even under the old law, I would still be regent - Hiccup has a living heir. But the old law doesn't matter, because I am still chief, and you know there is no one who would be able to take my place."

The man scowled and walked away, pretending he was too lofty to continue an argument he didn't know how to win.

The approaching sound of a baby's familiar screams made Astrid close her eyes and grit her teeth and clench her hands for a long minute until she exhaled deeply and turned to face Ratnest.

"He won't take my milk, Astrid. He spit out the first mouthful and then refused to try again."

Astrid took the baby and held him up until she was glaring into his red, screaming face. "Your father is not here anymore," she growled at her son. "No one is going to coddle you anymore when you throw your tantrums. If you won't eat, then you'll *starve*, do you understand me?" Briefly, she tried
to nurse him herself, but he was too upset by then to tolerate the touch of any hands other than the ones that were now lost to him.

Astrid went far away in her mind, trying to tune out his maddening cries, and found her mother. “If you don't take him, I will kill him,” she said in a wooden voice, holding him out.

Her mother, who was already tending to Valka, held out her arm for the boy. Val, excited by her brother's screams, added her own shrieks to his.

"Mom, don't ever, ever leave me alone with them. I will kill them. Don't ever leave me alone with them."

"Go on, Astrid. I've got them."

Astrid walked away, but her children's cries still seemed to ring in her ears even after she'd left them far behind.

---

Hiccup spent some time exploring, shadowed by the two dragons he assumed were his prison guards.

The nest seemed to be an immense fortress made of ice, within which thousands of dragons flew and played. For the first time in Hiccup's life, he saw (strangely adorable) dragon hatchlings, whose mothers prevented them from getting too close to him. He wondered why he had never until now thought about baby dragons, at least other than in the context of being fed to them.

Hiccup's guards warned away the most inquisitive dragons, which he appreciated. Even though none of them had shown any inclination to eat him so far, he still didn't feel comfortable being in close proximity to his people's ancestral enemies.

At one point, the king called out to his flock, then submerged. Dragons immediately took to the air in excitement, crowing and screeching as they flew out of the Sanctuary.
"What's hap--?!” Hiccup yelped as he was seized and carried along with the horde. His bruised shoulder throbbed in protest. "Okay, we have got to do something about this aerial transportation thing, this is not going to cut it!"

The flock flew out to sea, then began to circle and hover over a certain point. Hiccup couldn't see how that particular patch of ocean was different from any other part, until the dragon king suddenly came bursting out of the water, flinging up a SHOWER of fish.

The Night Fury dove. Hiccup yelled, terrified and excited by the rush of wind and the swift drop. It might actually be kind of fun, if he could figure out how to do this without being dangled like prey....

His prison guards settled on an ice floe, their mouths and talons filled with fish. The Stormcutter immediately dug into his; the Night Fury took no notice when Hiccup grabbed a couple of fish for himself. If he could figure out a way to pack them in ice and keep hold of them during the return journey, maybe he could cook them back at the nest....

The Fury snatched one of the fish out of his hands. "HEY!"

Instead of swallowing it, the black dragon looked like he'd somehow shot a tiny bolt of fire inside his mouth. Smoke leaked out from between his clenched teeth. He dropped the cooked fish at Hiccup's feet, snapped the second fish out of the young man's hands, cooked it as well, then dropped it beside the first and gave Hiccup an almost smug look.

"...Yeah, okay, or you can do that." Hiccup grinned. "Thanks, monster. Guess you figured out how to feed me properly all on your own."

The Night Fury frowned in confusion. Then, to Hiccup's amazement, the dragon uncomfortably peeled back its lips, revealing toothless gums in an expression that looked remarkably like a human smile. Hiccup stared for a minute, open-mouthed.

Then the teeth slipped back out, the dragon shook its head - his head - and returned to its - his - meal.

"...A Night Fury just smiled at me." Hiccup buried his hands in his hair, his heart pounding with excitement and some other emotion he could not name. "A Night Fury just smiled at me....!"

That was the moment when he started to think of dragons as people.
For the return journey, Hiccup managed to convince the Fury, whom he'd started calling 'Toothless,' to let him ride on his back. Hiccup clung, terrified but still more happy than he'd ever been in his life. The feeling of rushing through the sky was incredible, as was the very surprising feeling of being surrounded by many creatures who were bonded together, and with whom he felt like he...belonged. Not once since he had come to the dragons' nest had he felt any sense of judgment or dislike or antagonism - his worst enemies treated him better than his own people.

Dragons soared by, squawking at Toothless and his passenger in a friendly way. Toothless wove around the slower dragons, chortling in delight. At one point, it seemed he couldn't contain himself anymore and climbed higher and higher into the sky, leaving the rest of the flock behind, with Hiccup clinging to his back for dear life and thinking that he would love, love to die at this moment, because then he could die with a smile on his face and a heart full of joy.

Toothless made an outraged sound, and Hiccup laughed to see the Stormcutter ahead of them, diving over and around clouds with ease. The Night Fury pinned his head plates back and stretched out his neck and gave a powerful beat of his wings and arrowed forward. Hiccup, breathless from the speed and the excitement, heard a deadly familiar whistling sound and was exhilarated to realize that it came from the rush of wind past the Night Fury's impossibly fast body. 'And I'm a part of this now. That sound means him and me.'

They were gaining on the Stormcutter, but Hiccup couldn't maintain his hold. His fingers lost their grip, there was a horrible jerk, a moment where he was completely disoriented and had no idea what was happening, then he shouted when he realized he was falling. 'I'm going to die, I'm going to die, I'm going to--!' The thought didn't seem as terrifying as it should have. 'I'm going to die happy.'

Something struck his body, and when Hiccup caught his breath again, he found himself dangling from the Night Fury's claws. Toothless peered down at him and warbled in concern.

Hiccup burst into laughter and couldn't seem to stop. Toothless swooped close to the Stormcutter and dropped Hiccup onto the back of the four-winged dragon, who craned his head almost a full 180 degrees to echo the Night Fury's worry. Hiccup just clung, and laughed and laughed and laughed. When they reached the icy nest, he slid off of the Stormcutter's back and lay, utterly still with exhaustion, until Toothless took him back to their cave like a parent putting a sleepy child to bed.

'o.o.o.o.o

'I'm too old for this.'
Gobber had lost both parents, a brother, and a tiny half-sister. He had lost limbs. He had lost relatives and friends, including his best friend's fey young wife. He had weathered it all with acceptance and good humor, for he was a Viking. It was simply the way of things. You loved, you lost, you grieved, you kept living. You did your best. You pressed on. You looked for the light that always burned even in the midst of darkness.

Then he had lost Stoick. Stoick had been his dearest companion, his brother of the heart, his one constant. He had known that Stoick the Vast would always be there...until the day he wasn't.

That had been a heavy blow, more of a struggle to survive, but Gobber had done it. He still had things to live for, like his work, and Hiccup, who was practically as much his son as he had been Stoick's. Hiccup, that infuriating, bright, unfathomable boy...that irrepressible young dreamer, whose soul had been battered by a loveless, crushing marriage, yet had nevertheless continued to glow despite all odds.... He had blossomed as a father, had given his whole life to his children figuratively, and then given it for them literally.

Gobber made a soft sound of misery. He was too old for this. He couldn't do it anymore, the losing and the grieving. It was too much. They had taken everything from him; what more was there to take?

He had nothing left. He would lie here and grieve until the next raid, and then he would take up his weapon one more time in defense of his home. He would take no shield. He would fight until the Valkyries came for him, until they took him to the only place where he would see his loved ones again.

The door creaked open. The footsteps of the intruder were covered by the sound of crying babies, and Gobber covered his ears against the din.

Something small and soft and squirming was placed on his chest. He tried to ignore it, but had to put out a hand to catch the child before she fell off the bed. Slowly, he dragged himself into a sitting position and watched the baby who was now pulling happily at his beard. The quiet seemed louder than the infants' wailing had been.

"Gah," little Valka commented, trying to pull one of the leather cords out of her honorary grandfather's hair. "Gah!"

She looked like her father. Gobber didn't know why anyone bothered to question the twins' paternity, since they looked like the offspring of Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III and Astrid Hofferson.
Valka was a living, breathing part of her father's legacy, proving that even though he was gone, he had not left a complete void. It was almost as if he had known he would be departing Midgard before his mentor, as if he had purposefully left behind a reminder of why his tired, brokenhearted second father still needed to keep living. "Dammit, Hiccup," Gobber whispered.

Valka gurgled at him and Gobber embraced her, crying softly.

Astrid, sitting across the room quietly nursing Finn, saw a small spark of life return to the man's eyes. She smiled in relief.

*To be continued....*
Chapter 15

_Carried Off_, a DreamWorks' *How to Train Your Dragon* fanfic by Raberba girl

Chapter 15 (rough draft)

This time, Hiccup only experienced a couple of seconds of disorientation when he awakened, and barely cringed to find himself being hugged by a Night Fury. He stood up and stretched, then ambled out and greeted the Stormcutter. "Mornin', owl-face." The dragon squawked a return greeting.

"O-kay. Not sure what that was all about, but whatever..."

He felt gross enough that he did the best he could to bathe, an activity which the dragons seemed to find both interesting and confusing. The water was ICY, so he rushed through it as quickly as he could and then cuddled desperately with Toothless until he stopped shivering. Then he sought out the king.

Hiccup approached hesitantly, still awed and intimidated by the leviathan's size. The king's eyes turned to him, and he hurriedly bowed. "Good morning...er, Your Majesty."

The king exhaled. Hiccup gasped and stumbled backward as a white cloud came wafting toward him, but it turned out to be harmless. He sheepishly brushed the frost off himself. "I..." He remembered that spoken words meant nothing to the king, who was an animal, after all. An incredibly majestic and intelligent one, but still a creature who perceived and processed the world differently than humans did.
Hiccup closed his eyes and tentatively reached out a thought. "'Hello.' Greeting scared, I reach for you scared, me small small small you biiiiig, scared, greet don't hurt me, I want--" He sensed contact, the beginning of a relieved, pleased return greeting. "Scared scared scared don't hurt me don't hurt me don't hurt me!"

"Reassurance warmth safe peace love safe."

Hiccup opened his eyes and stared up at the king. "...Love me???. Why you love me???. Little stranger enemy small bad ashamed 'I hate this'...!"

The king was surprised, then confused, then compassionate. "Small broken frightened ones seek refuge here; welcome. 'Hiccup' is good. Not hurt my flocklings, good."

Hiccup wasn't thinking consciously now as he remembered himself back in his village, useless and weak and worthless and good for nothing except shaping metal and warming the chieftain's bed and keeping her babies out of her way, worthless worthless never measure up worthless--

"STOP."

Hiccup automatically cowered at the forcefulness of the king's command.

The great dragon's next thoughts were gentler. "Monsters trap you in darkness; bad. No darkness here. Safe. I love you."

Hiccup burst into tears, hating himself.

"Why grieve and shame?!" The great alpha had comforted many broken-hearted survivors, but he had never seen such self-loathing in a creature before. Only the dark corners of Valka's heart had ever come close, but her strange shame was nothing compared to this wreckage. "Love is a good thing, yes...? Love for you, true and strong and good...."

"Toothless," Hiccup croaked out, struggling onto the confused Night Fury's back, "take me away, take me away, take me away...!"
He hid from the king for two whole days after that, terrified of a being who could see so deeply into his heart. What made him finally creep back was that it had occurred to him that perhaps his mother might not be dead after all. Whether 'Owl-face' was indeed her abductor or not, the fact remained that these dragons were the complete opposite of what he'd thought dragons were all his life, which meant there was a chance that perhaps they had not killed his mother. She had been carried off just like he was, and he wasn't dead, so perhaps she was miraculously alive as well - though he had searched the nest and not found a trace of her.

Still, he wanted to ask, and the only creature in this nest whom he could ask was the king. None of the other dragons he experimented with ever responded to his attempts at mental communication.

"H...Hi there." "Scared scared scared don't hurt me don't look at me don't touch me don't hurt me...."

The king regarded him warily.

"'M...Mom.' Human woman, my mother, warm safe caretaker loves me her child son--""

There was a jumbled, disorientingly scent-based impression that hurt Hiccup's head before it resolved itself into a visual image. He gasped when he realized that the king was doing the equivalent of showing him a representation of a human woman. Long red hair, slightly haunted green eyes but a warm smile....

"Hiccup's dam, 'mother,' loves her child 'son;' you. Mother loves you." Moving images filled Hiccup's mind, distorted by a dragon's perception but still recognizable as memories. His mother, Valka, caressing the Stormcutter and talking to the dragon animatedly as he vocalized enthusiastically back at her ("'Cloudjumper' her sound-name for him, One Who Leaps Over Clouds, 'Cloudjumper'"); Valka spreading her arms in the joy of flight as Cloudjumper carried her through the skies; Valka crooning at dragon hatchlings who flocked around her, playing with them and comforting them.... Cloudjumper wailing his grief; the sorrow of a flock who has lost a cherished member; quiet emptiness where there had once been life; anger and sorrow that this tiny, wonderful little flockling had been lost forever, inexplicably at the hands of her own kind....

Hiccup stumbled away, clawing at his head as if he could tear out the memories. The king withdrew and Hiccup blindly walked and climbed around the nest for a long time, stunned. 'My mother was here.... Owl-face was the one who took her, he took her and he...he loved her, they all did, the king and this whole flock, they loved her even though she was human, she was HERE, she was right here but now she's gone, humans killed her...I'll never see her, my mother was right here but I'll never, ever see her....'
He cried out, angry and hopeless. 'She was here. My mom was here. But she's gone. She's gone....' He was curled up, rocking, clutching his head, whimpering in raging, grieving frustration. 'I'm gone, too. My babies are wondering where I am but I'm not there, I'll never see them again, I'll never hold them again, I'm gone. Just like Mom.'

He cried out again, this time in surprise and alarm as Toothless knocked him over and licked his chest in an angry sort of way. Frustrated, the Night Fury clamped his teeth on the front of Hiccup's tunic and ripped. Hiccup squirmed, frightened and confused, and winced in apprehension when the dragon licked bare skin as if trying to scrape it out of the way with his tongue. Draconic green eyes glared helplessly. Then Toothless flopped down and rested his head on Hiccup with a sigh.

"...You know it's emotional pain, and you can't help with that," Hiccup slowly realized. He scratched behind the Night Fury's ear-like head plates, and the dragon made a rumbling "Mmmmm" sound. "Sorry, buddy. Hearts aren't as easy to heal as flesh is."

Toothless rolled his eyes up to glance at him.

"I don't even know if I'm grateful or not," Hiccup said softly. "I...I like it here...." He thought about it, and decided that it was true. "I like it here. But my kids, Toothless. My children are still on Berk. They need me. You didn't just take me to paradise, you took me away from my babies. You can't do that, okay?"

He looked over at Owl-face - no, Cloudjumper, that's the name his mother had given that dragon - who was keeping watch nearby as always. "I know you guys mean well. I don't know how you knew, but you did, and thank you for the sentiment and all, but...we silly humans, we do this thing called procreating. We become a package deal when that happens. If you take one, you've got to take the others along as well, and I know you didn't know that, but you can't do that anymore, all right?"

He closed his arms around the Night Fury in a hug. "Take me home, Toothless," he whispered. "I have to go back to hell, because that's where my children are. I can't let them go through what I did just because a dragon chose the wrong person to rescue."

How did Hiccup DO this!?' Astrid found herself thinking often, wildly frustrated by the stress but also helplessly admiring. Hiccup had had a full-time job just as she did, yet he had also looked after the children, caring for them in almost every way except feeding them...and he'd done most of the cooking. And some of the cleaning. 'Hiccup, you were the most amazing man-- ...At least, the most
amazing woman-in-a-man's-body I could ever imagine.'

Astrid herself couldn't do it. She was going crazy. She hired a wet nurse to help feed Valka when she was busy (Finn refused any milk that wasn't his own mother's) and had her mom move in with her to take over many of the more housewifely duties that Hiccup had previously covered, but it still didn't seem to be enough, even with Gobber's help. 'How did Hiccup DO this...?!

She didn't even think about her late husband's personal belongings until one evening when they were trying to find a place to store a crate, and her mother suggested putting it up in the loft.

The loft. Hiccup's room.

Astrid avoided it for a while, but then went up there once when she was missing her husband badly, missing his warmth and the sound of his voice and even his smell. She stood in the center of his room for a long time, slowly turning, silent tears running down her face as she looked at this place that belonged to him, at all his things waiting for him as if he would come back to finish that half-sketched drawing, straighten that unmade bed, pick up those carelessly scattered clothes....

She spent a single night sleeping in his bed, trying to get close to him. It only served to sharply emphasize his absence, rub in her face the fact that she had lost him forever. It was too painful. The whole room was too painful. She had to get rid of this shrine to him, this intimate sort of grave marker which kept calling for a soul that would never return.

Astrid gathered it all together except for the little stuffed Nadder and an old knife, which she turned over in her hands for a long time before setting aside. They would be final gifts to her children from their father.

She asked Gobber what he wanted to salvage from Hiccup's things before she burned the rest. Gobber took it all, storing it in the back room of the forge where Hiccup had used to work. Hiccup's bedroom had not been the only shrine he'd left behind.

'It doesn't matter,' Astrid thought. 'It's out of my sight, gone, just like him. ...Goodbye, Hiccup. Never haunt me again.'

She was in the Great Hall one evening, slumped wearily on a bench, nursing Finn as she picked at her supper and ignored Valka complaining in her mother's arms beside her.
"...that old nuisance...!"

Astrid paused. For some reason, the conversation at the next table had caught her attention.

"At least he ended up being good for one thing."

"Yeah, a human shield for our next chief! Guess he wasn't entirely useless after all, haha!"

'They're talking about Hiccup,' Astrid thought. 'They're talking about my husband as if that's all he was good for.'

"I suppose we are better off, though I admit I didn't realize how much he'd helped the blacksmith--"

"Excuse me," Astrid said coldly.

Both men stared at her.

"Hiccup Stoickson gave his life for the good of this tribe, facing down the most fearsome dragon in the world with more courage than I've ever seen from either of you. Do not speak ill of him again."

Grumbling, the men turned back to their ale.

To be continued....
Chapter 16

*Carried Off*, a DreamWorks' *How to Train Your Dragon* fanfic by Raberba girl

Chapter 16 (rough draft)

Over the next week or two, as the bruises on his shoulder healed, Hiccup tried to escape.

Whenever he tried to simply walk away, Toothless and Cloudjumper would tag along for a while, but then scoop him up and fly back to the nest with him whenever they decided he'd strayed too far. Sneaking out was impossible, because even during the very rare times when both Toothless and Cloudjumper were asleep (as well as the time Hiccup visited the privy at night and then tried to just continue on instead of returning to the little cave), random dragons would 'talk' to him, and Toothless would apparently get wind of it and come to reclaim his human captive.

It was true that the longer Hiccup spent as a prisoner of the dragons, the less he minded it. The icy northern sanctuary was beautiful, and the Bewilderbeast (Hiccup was trying out different names for the leviathan's breed and was starting to like that name best) kept his people well fed, though Hiccup was still trying to figure out how to regularly get things to eat that weren't fish. The great dragon king was a benevolent ruler, showing patience to even his most annoying subjects and refereeing disputes with fairness (as far as Hiccup could tell).

The dragon hatchlings were endlessly fascinating to watch, and the braver ones would occasionally dare to investigate Hiccup and let him touch them. Second-best of all, there was absolutely *no one* who ever insulted Hiccup, scorned him, put him down, physically hurt him (at least, not much and never deliberately), or made him feel bad about himself at all, much less like scum. It made the dragon nest feel like a safe place for his soul, a place he'd always longed for but had given up all hope of ever finding.

The best thing of all was the flying.

Being hauled around like helpless prey was, although no longer terrifying, still irritating and undignified, but as the dragons started trusting Hiccup more, he was able to coax more and more of them to allow him to ride on their backs. He experimented with different ways of indicating guidance, mostly with his knees, though he couldn't steer them by force - whether they chose to heed his flying directions or not was entirely their choice.

Although dragons never failed to catch him whenever he went tumbling off their backs, Hiccup still grew tired of falling so often, so he decided that he needed some kind of saddle and a way to anchor
himself to it. He scavenged his way through the nest and managed to assemble a small collection of human artifacts, including things like broken bits of wood or short pieces of rope that would have been garbage in a human village but were potentially valuable here in the wilderness. The dragons also became surprisingly helpful, starting to bring him various human objects soon after they noticed him collecting them.

Hiccup eventually managed to scrounge up a piece of leather that helped to protect his butt from chafing against dragon scales, and enough lengths of tie-able things that he could use to fasten himself to the ‘saddle’ and whatever dragon he was riding. It was a small improvement, but he kept resolving to gather up proper materials the next time he was anywhere near human civilization - and then he’d keep remembering that if he ever did manage to return to human civilization, it would probably mean he'd never see the Sanctuary and its remarkable inhabitants again. The thought made him more sad than he thought it would.

Although Hiccup would gladly ride on any dragon willing to carry him, he and Toothless soon developed a particular affinity for each other in the air. The Night Fury was by far the fastest dragon in the nest, and it was almost as if his body was perfectly designed to accommodate a rider of Hiccup's size. Both young adults shared a growing love of thrills - between Toothless's natural gifts and Hiccup's creativity, they were soon pulling off aerial stunts and maneuvers together that would surprise, baffle, alarm, amuse, or excite the rest of the flock. There was a troop of juvenile copycats who particularly loved to try out the new flying tricks, but Hiccup and Toothless remained in a league of their own.

Flying with Toothless was an incredible pleasure in and of itself, but Hiccup also had an ulterior motive in getting the Night Fury comfortable to his presence and partnership. As they started venturing farther and farther from the nest, Hiccup kept an eye out for anything that would help him get his bearings, and at last, about three months after his abduction, he knew where he was. He could find his way to Berk from here. He started nudging Toothless in that direction.

On the first attempt, they seemed to be flying perfectly fine until Toothless suddenly veered away and started arrowing back to the nest, seeming mysteriously urgent, and nothing Hiccup did could get the dragon back on track.

The second time, Toothless veered away again at almost the exact same latitude, as if he had hit some sort of barrier. This time, he snarled in displeasure, and actually glared at Hiccup when the man tried to coax him back around. Hiccup nervously wondered if the Night Fury had caught on to his plans.

The third time, Toothless utterly refused to go south, and when Hiccup finally lost his temper, the dragon lost his as well. There were no bruises this time because Hiccup now knew not to struggle, but he still spent almost half an hour pinned to the ground, fuming, before he finally gave in and let his captor drag him back to the nest.
He hadn't felt like a prisoner in a long time, but now he was developing a sense of oppression, as if he was locked in a cell. Toothless was a more benevolent master than Astrid had been, but he did still impose his will on his physically weaker companion, and Hiccup grew angrier as the familiar feeling of suffocation began to return.

Hiccup stood at the very edge of a rocky ledge, staring out at his sullied paradise. It was still as beautiful as ever; the king was still magnificent; the other dragons were still innocent. But two people - animals, yes, but he knew now that they were people as well - with the best intentions were slowly burying his soul alive, and he couldn't stand it. 'I wish I'd never had children,' he thought. If it weren't for Finn and Valka, he could be happy in the dragon nest with no regrets and forget that he had ever been a Viking.

But his children existed, and they needed him, and he was failing them. He was betraying them every single day he stayed away from them. He found himself grateful for his harsh training back on Berk, because it meant he knew how to fight overpowering enemies. "I have nothing else to live for, right?" Hiccup said softly, drinking in the sight of the happy dragon nest one last time. He closed his eyes and smiled a little, then walked to the darkest corner of the cave and lay down with his face to the wall.

It went on for two or three days. Hiccup lay there, thinking constantly about his children, ignoring every encouraging warble and all the insistent pawings. He also ignored all the food dropped close to him, even when it started to rot. In the beginning when he still needed to relieve himself, he would do it right there in the cave, which he knew annoyed the fastidious dragons, and then lie back down in the spot where he had determined to either win victory or die.

Toothless was puzzled at first, then worried and insistent, then angry. Hiccup calmly looked up into the narrow-eyed face snarling threateningly above him, making no attempt to push the dragon's heavy paw off his chest. "Are you going to rape me? The way my wife did when she looked at me like that and pinned me down like this?" he said mildly. "Are you going to grow some opposable thumbs so you can literally shove that food down my throat? Are you going to get bored and put me out of my misery? Do your worst. I'll either win or die, but there's no way I'll lose."

Looking disturbed, Toothless whined and backed off, stared at Hiccup for a minute, then picked up the fish again and pressed it to Hiccup's face, whimpering beseechingly.

Hiccup kept his mouth closed and turned his head away. When the dragon didn't back off, Hiccup reached for the fish and threw it as far as his weakened muscles could manage. "I'll eat when you take me home. Not before." Then he curled up and drifted into another half-sleep.
The next time he became aware of something, it was to find his limp body being pulled onto the Night Fury's back. Hiccup grunted in displeasure at being taken away from the spot of his last stand, but he was too tired to resist. If he couldn't come crawling back here after Toothless finished doing whatever he was planning to do to him, Hiccup could always just curl up wherever that was and keep dying of dehydration. He could do that anywhere, really; it just seemed more satisfyingly dramatic to do it in barren shadows.

A mountain moved, and a jolt of alarm went through Hiccup. Toothless had brought him to the king. Hiccup had managed to avoid the Leviathan most of the time except for polite greetings, but now, as he watched Toothless barking urgently up at the mighty sea dragon, he knew that he was going to be in big trouble if the king took the Night Fury's side. Hiccup swallowed, feeling like he'd just done something awful and was waiting for his father to find out and punish him.

Aquamarine eyes turned to him, narrowed in anger, and Hiccup whimpered. He tried to slide off the Night Fury's back, but then he stared upward in shock as the dragon king lowered his massive head, straight toward Hiccup, jaws opening.

'He's going to eat me?!' Hiccup was paralyzed with astonishment. Before he could decide whether he should just let himself be eaten or try to escape, he was being scooped up and drawn in and BURIED in slimy, smelly darkness.

His heart pounded in his chest, he couldn't breathe, all his senses were on high alert. He wondered how long the dragon would take to swallow. Or crunch.

"BE STILL."

Hiccup was terrified. His face and hands tingled; it was as if the touch of his exposed skin on the sensitive flesh of the dragon's mouth gave them a clearer and more powerful connection than he'd ever fathomed. The king's anger was overpowering, and Hiccup wondered if it was possible to be crushed to death by the sheer strength of an emotion.

"WHY????"

Hiccup burst into tearless sobs. He could feel it as if it was a tangible thing wrapping his whole body: the king's utter perplexity at Hiccup's suicidal desperation; the frustration at Hiccup's refusal to be tended to by a companion who cared about him; the fear for his well-being, that the king was doing something wrong, was missing something that his fragile little flockling needed; the distress that the kind-hearted king was causing such terror in a small creature that he wished only to protect and nurture; and the love that made the king care so much in the first place.
‘I--! I...!’ Hiccup felt like his soul was being cut open, pieces of his heart like organs being very carefully lifted out and examined. "Babies children mine my Finn Val precious little hands faces soft fair hair mine my treasures miss me need me want me NEED THEM pain failure desperation grief grief grief go back home my babies mine my children Dad can never always disappointed Daddy come back left me dead Mom DEAD Finn Val wait for me I'm coming I'm coming dying weak useless crushed Astrid mate wife sex hates me crushing me hurts curl up in the dark and never come out again hate this Dad Finn Val come back dying lost falling darkness please let me die let me die let me die...!"

"HUSH."

Hiccup lay dazed, numb, sensing the king’s horror but unable to feel anything himself.

"...Little one. So broken. I didn’t know any creature could be so very much broken. Poor thing. Let me please. Please heal."

"Lost. Empty. Dark."

There was a bigger surge of movement than usual, and Hiccup found himself pressed to the roof of the mouth for a long moment before settling again. Later, he realized that the dragon had probably needed to swallow excess saliva and hadn’t wanted to accidentally swallow the little human along with it.

"Kill me?"

"Hush."

"...Peace. Please." Hiccup lost track of time as he was bathed in a sort of soul warmth. After what felt like ages of nothing but the king's love, Hiccup ventured timidly, "Babies. My Finn, sweet frightened child; my Val, so brave and bright."

"Took you away from them," the king realized. "Stole you."
"Stolen...powerless...." Hiccup remembered the terrifying abduction and, dimly behind it, being physically used by his wife. He wasn't a person, he was a thing for others to do with as they pleased, even at this very moment. He had long ago gotten used to losing ownership of his own body.

"Angry."

"At me...?"

"NOT YOU."

"Fight for me, fight for me...worthless weak worthless, hide me bury me fight for me...." His skin burned as he noticed the dragon's saliva starting to digest him, and he whimpered in pain. Nausea surged in his stomach at a great movement, then sunlight blinded him and he was gently deposited on the cold moss. He lay weeping, too weak to move, overwhelmed and wanting to sleep for years.

A bone-rattling roar terrified him. Only one creature he knew of was big enough to make a sound like that, a sound that seemed to shake the world on its foundations. Hiccup threw his arms over his head and curled up tightly before finally realizing that it was not him those wrathful aquamarine eyes were fixed upon.

The entire nest had gone eerily still and silent, dragons staring wide-eyed at their enraged king. Cloudjumper was making a distressed mewing sound as he slunk under a ledge in disgrace. Toothless, bearing the brunt of it, was flattened to the ground as if being physically crushed, his eyes huge with dismay, his head plates tightly pinned back.

Hiccup couldn't understand the dragons' communication with each other, but he recognized a castigation when he saw one. His heart ached. After a moment, he crept close and put his arms around the Night Fury as if shielding the bigger creature with his body. It was incredibly difficult for Hiccup to meet the king's eyes, but he forced himself to even though it made his heart quail. "I-It's...okay.... G-Go easy on him...he m-meant well."

He pressed into Toothless and felt the trembling dragon pressing back as if they were trying to disappear into each other. Even though the king looked mostly just surprised now, Hiccup still felt like he was being punished along with Toothless. "H-He...He was only trying...to help...he was only trying to help...." 'All I ever, ever wanted to do was help. I just wanted to help. To make things better. I always screwed up, and if, just once, no one had blamed me....' Unable to stand it anymore, he hid his face against the Night Fury's warm black scales.
After a long pause, he heard the king croak out a command of some sort, but he didn't look up. A minute later, wet things were dropped on him, and Hiccup raised his head to find fresh fish scattered at his feet. The Snafflefang who had brought them cooed at him encouragingly.

"EAT," the king commanded.

Hiccup was powerless to disobey. He sank to his knees and picked up the closest fish, biting straight into it even though it was raw, crushed by his failure. He had been so very determined, he had made it so far, only now to be thwarted in the end.... 'I want to die.'

Yet they would deny him even that. He would eat and drink, his body would regain its strength, but his soul would be dead and he would spend his days as a prisoner, a slave, a puppet. 'I don't even belong to myself. I can do nothing for my children because I can't even do anything for myself. ...They deserved so much better than me for a father.' He slumped against Toothless in defeat and kept eating without tasting until the fish was little more than bones in his hand. He ate another. Then he slept.

He woke up in darkness, to the sound of a grieving dragon. The keening paused as he shifted. He saw a reflection of distant moonlight in wide green eyes, heard the scuffing movement of a living shadow he could barely see, then he gasped in pain as a tongue scraped across the raw skin of his face. "O-o-www, don't, Toothless, it hurts...."

A pause, and that heartbroken keen again.

"It's okay, buddy...I'm sorry...he didn't mean to start digesting me, but it still hurts...."

Very tentatively, the tongue touched his hair and withdrew.

Hiccup smiled a little and reached out until he felt scales under his fingertips. He scratched encouragingly. "That part's okay. My hair doesn't hurt."

Tentatively again, then more purposefully, the tongue bathed his hair. Despite being covered by a crackling, smelly layer of dried saliva from his stint in the king's mouth, Hiccup felt strangely peaceful. He closed his eyes again.

After a while, the moonlight at the cave mouth was momentarily blocked as a large dragon, probably
Cloudjumper, came inside. The heavy pawsteps came to a halt nearby, and something fishy-smelling hit the floor with a wet slap.

Toothless made a broken warbling noise that sounded like a recently punished child begging, with a mix of hope and despair, to be forgiven. Hiccup felt for the fish, grasped it, and held it up. "Cook."

Toothless knew what that word meant by now. He eagerly snatched the fish into his mouth, zapped it with a tiny plasma blast, then dropped it on Hiccup's chest and panted in anticipation.

"I didn't know it was possible to love someone a lot but still hate them at the same time," Hiccup remarked. He picked up the fish with a sigh and started nibbling at it. "I know you're sorry. I know you meant well. Great. Fantastic. Still means nothing as long as I'm not with my children." He paused so he could point with his other hand. "I hate you. I love you, but I hate you."

Toothless whimpered as if he understood the words.

"...Come here." Hiccup sat up and felt around and tugged until the Night Fury's head was in his lap. He scratched and stroked his fingertips around each fin, caressing, not sure why he felt so compelled to reassure his own captor. "Someday," he whispered, "I will find something that you can't protect me from."

With one last pat, he turned and lay down again, snuggling back into the dragon's warmth. A black foreleg draped tentatively around his torso. 'Owned. Claimed. Possessed,' Hiccup thought idly. It felt nice, but there was still no mistaking the gesture. 'I will always belong to someone else, won't I. ...At least it might as well be someone who cares about me.' He sighed and fell asleep.

To be continued....

Author's Notes: For the record, Hiccup is misunderstanding something.
"Babe!"

"Not now, Snotlout," Astrid snapped.

"Aw, come on, don't be like that."

"I'm busy."

"You're always busy! Look, babe--"

"I am not your babe."

"Okay, fine, Astrid! I have a proposition for you."

"The answer's no."

"You haven't even heard my proposition yet!"

"Doesn't matter. I already know it's no."

"Astriiiiiid! Come on, you're a grown woman, your bed's a little less crowded now, I know what you need. I'm just saying, I'm here ready and waiting to, y'know, crowd up your bed again."

She hated so much that he was right. And that he was less repulsive to her now than he had been two or three years before. "Snotlout, you are married now."
"Hey, no problem, I can get divorced!"

"On what grounds, Snotlout?!"

"On the grounds of...uh...oh! On the grounds of she hasn't given me any kids!"

"Of course she hasn't, Snot. She's 47."

"Exactly."

"Uuugghhh, Snotlout...." 'Don't tempt me.' "I am not going to destroy a woman's marriage just because you're taking advantage of my husband's death to try to get into my pants."

"Fine, then I won't divorce her! You can be my mistress; problem solv-- OOOOWWWW!"

o.o.o.o.o

When Hiccup awakened again, he went to wash off all the dragon spit he was covered with, which he did in one of the normal pools rather than the hot spring he usually used. Naked and covered with gooseflesh from the ice-cold water, he rested against a rock and wondered vaguely if he would die of hypothermia.

No such luck. As soon as Toothless realized that his human's body temperature was dangerously low, the dragon practically lay on him until Hiccup stopped shivering. "So suicide by bath isn't going to work, either, huh."

Then it was breakfast. Hiccup was annoyed at his traitorously ravenous body, and ate far more than he ordinarily would have even in normal health. After a few meals, though, his body seemed back to normal, and he was left with the dismal prospect of spending the rest of his failed life here, learning how to forget about his children and perhaps how to be happy in his beautiful prison. "Toothless, fly?" he asked softly. He needed a distraction.
The dragon looked at him, but instead of reacting with excitement the way he usually did, he made a sorrowful sort of noise and was practically cringing as he lowered himself for Hiccup to mount.

Hiccup frowned as he slipped onto the dragon's back. "What's wrong with you? You love flying."

Toothless walked slowly to a ledge and didn't take off immediately. Hiccup was about to urge him on when the Night Fury lifted his head and called out.

The great sea dragon rose to his full height. Hiccup stared, wondering what was so different about this flight that the king himself would take notice of it.

"Goodbye."

Love and sadness flooded Hiccup's mind and then reluctantly retreated.

"What?"

A swarm of dragons, many of whom Hiccup recognized, rushed to fly above him and Toothless, crying out over and over again. Some of them landed and nuzzled or licked or preened Hiccup before taking off again. Before Hiccup could gather his thoughts and properly ask the king what was going on, it was too late - Toothless finally took off, Cloudjumper at his side, and the nest was left behind.

"Up."

Hiccup signaled with his knees, but the dragon only rolled his shoulders and pressed on.

"Toothless? No fancy flying today?" The only answer was a warble that Hiccup didn't understand.

"What is wrong with everyone this morning?"

After a while, Hiccup realized to his surprise that they were flying south. Halfheartedly, he thought about making another escape attempt, but to his shock, Toothless continued on course with no prompting, and flew straight through the invisible, mysterious barrier that had always turned him away before. "Toothless?!"

Eventually, there came to be no doubt about it. They were leaving the nest. Hiccup's heart beat a little harder, and he tried to quash the hope that maybe, maybe, at last they might be setting him free of their own accord. "I.... Don't be cruel to me.... Don't get my hopes up and then make me realize I'm wrong...."

They touched down at twilight, near the first decently safe-looking human settlement. The three of
them spent the night curled up together for warmth and comfort, and lingered together in the morning.

Hiccup embraced both dragons and whispered how much he would miss them. When they saw he was leaving, Toothless cried and licked him and nuzzled him; Cloudjumper preened him as meticulously as a mother dressing her daughter's hair on her wedding day.

Then Hiccup walked away, and the dragons did not follow, and it was a long time before the memory of Toothless's mournful wail began to fade from Hiccup's mind.

Hiccup gained enough money doing smithwork and odd jobs to earn him passage to the edge of the Barbaric Archipelago. Then, in the familiar, war-torn territory of Vikings and dragons, Hiccup had to hide his identity, since only the Berserkers were still allies of Berk. He would be run out of town if anyone else found out he was the Hooligan heir who had caused his tribe to fall almost to the level of Outcasts nearly nine years before.

Hiccup pretended to be one of the Bog-Burglars' 'Lost Boys' so that no one would try to pry further into his background or think he was worth anything. As far as the people he met were concerned, he was just one more fatherless, unwanted son who'd gotten kicked out of his female-controlled tribe as soon he was old enough, and had spent the years since then trying to make a real life for himself. 'Not too far from the truth, actually...'

His cover story and his skills and what was left of his money got him food, shelter, and eventual transportation to an uninhabited island on the border of Hooligan territory. He had hoped to be able to catch a ride from Trader Johann, but his path never crossed with the man, which meant that he was going to have to figure out a way to get from this tiny heap of rock in the middle of nowhere back to his children on Berk.

Hiccup woke up in the middle of the night to find two very small Gronckles nosing curiously at him. They both paused when he awakened, probably sensing his surge of adrenaline and increased heartbeat, but he didn't move and he breathed deeply to calm himself down. One of the fledglings licked him. "Hi," Hiccup whispered. He slowly lifted a hand and scratched at her rough hide. The fledgling rumbled in delight and pressed into his touch; her sibling pawed at Hiccup, and he lifted his other hand to oblige with more scratches.

The mother dragon, who had been rooting around in Hiccup's belongings as a third fledgling investigated the remains of the campfire, raised her head abruptly and growled in alarm.
"It's all right," Hiccup called softly. "I'm a friend."

The mother marched forward, scattering her sheepish children, and stood over Hiccup, glaring at him. He had learned that dragons responded to eye contact from strangers as if it was threatening, so he moved his gaze away, and he lifted his chin to indicate surrender. After a long moment, the Gronckle cautiously lowered her head to lick his bare throat, just like the dragons at the Sanctuary had done whenever they won a game or a power struggle or had finished chastising a repentant youngling.

"See?" Hiccup murmured. "You win. You're the boss. I won't hurt you. Okay?"

The Gronckle made a wary humming sound and backed away.

Hiccup rolled onto his stomach and started to crawl forward, but she nervously took another step back. "I'm not gonna hurt you," he crooned, lifting his hand. "I just need your help with something, okay?"

The Gronckle sniffed and licked his fingers. Her children, encouraged, approached again to investigate Hiccup. Ignoring their nudges and gentle bites, he started trying to haul himself onto the mother dragon's back without actually standing up, but she shied away and barked to her children. The fledglings protested, but then nuzzled Hiccup in farewell and reluctantly turned away.

Hiccup exhaled as he watched the little family disappear into the darkness. "Patience, Hiccup," he whispered to himself.

It took several days for Hiccup to befriend the mother Gronckle and get her to trust him enough to let him onto her back. It took a few more days for him to coax her to bring him even to the very far side of the island of Berk, since she seemed understandably reluctant to get so close to the human village. "It's okay, girl, just a liiiittle farther, then I promise I will never bother you or your kiddos ever again, okay?"

At long last, as twilight began to fall, Hiccup set foot on his homeland. He stood for a minute, looking around and breathing the air and absently caressing the fledglings who kept bumping against him. Then he smiled at the little Gronckle family, made his best imitation of the sound the Sanctuary dragons had cried at him when he'd left for the last time, and headed into the forest.
The young Gronckles followed him for a while, prancing at his side and darting off to investigate various things as if they were pet dogs, but their mother eventually called them back, anxiety in her voice. The fledglings sadly nuzzled Hiccup one last time, and then he was alone.

It was long after most people's suppertime when he reached the village. Trying his best to not be noticed, Hiccup made his way to his house - at least, the spot where his house usually stood. The building looked different; it had likely been damaged and repaired during his absence.

He was dreading seeing Astrid again, but what he wanted more than anything in the world was to see his children, so he barely hesitated to walk inside.

The central fire was low, shielded from the babies by a screen around its perimeter. No lamps were lit. Hiccup dimly registered the sound of female voices coming from behind Astrid's closed bedroom door - Astrid herself sounding like she was arguing or ranting, the other woman's voice a murmur, both too muffled to distinguish the words.

Hiccup barely noticed because his eyes were fixed on his babies - Finn lying in a heap on the floor, making low, dull sobs as if he had been crying unheeded for a long time; Valka standing by a chair and gripping it for balance (she could stand up now...?!), screaming at the top of her lungs in outrage that she was being ignored in the quiet, boring darkness.

'They're so big,' Hiccup thought, horrified and grieving, even as he reached out with a soothing croon in his voice. 'They're so big, I missed so much, this is what you did to us, Toothless, how can I forgive you for this...?' "Hey, baby girl, hey~"

He was a little startled when Valka jerked and shrieked out an extra-loud cry as his arms came around her. She thrashed and hit him.

'She's frightened?!' "Val...Val, sweetie, it's me, it's daddy...."

She cried out in a strange mix of distress and curiosity, painfully gripping his ear and a fistful of his hair for a minute as she stared intently at him. He kept very still except to rub her back soothingly. "Hi," he whispered, trying to smile. The baby relaxed a little and started biting him, which hurt too because she had teeth now that hadn't been there the last time he'd seen her.

"Oh, Val..." Still holding her, he reached out for Finn, who abruptly went silent at the first touch. The baby stayed rigid and quiet as his father gently stroked his back, but when Hiccup started to tuck
his hand beneath the boy's body and pull him closer, Finn panicked, struggling and sobbing. "Finn, Finn, hey, it's me, it's just me, it's all right, it's only me...."

The boy kept squirming, clutching Hiccup's arm hard, sounding terrified as he wept.

'He doesn't recognize me...my own children don't recognize me....' Tears ran down Hiccup's face as he let go of his son, who crawled away on his belly and clutched at a stuffed animal, still crying.

Valka was babbling curiously now, patting Hiccup and pressing her face to his for a long moment as if wanting to experience his tears for herself. Then she pulled away so she could plop down on her bottom and play with the cluster of dragon scales hanging from his waist. "That's where I've been, sweetie," Hiccup whispered. "I didn't mean to leave you. I would have never left you if I'd had a choice. I'm so, so sorry."

He scooted close enough to reach Finn again, relieved when Valka followed her new toy. Hiccup didn't try to pick up Finn this time, but simply stroked the boy's back, feeling a very tiny bit better when he realized that the stuffed animal his son was clinging to so tightly was actually the little Nadder that Hiccup's own mother had made for him when he'd been a baby. Someone had taken it from his things and given it to Finn to comfort him in his father's absence. "I came back, Finn...it's going to be all right now...."

After several long minutes, Finn's small body started to relax. Hiccup caressed his hair and stroked his cheek with a gentle fingertip. Finn turned away and rubbed his face against the stuffed animal, but then he paused and pressed his head into Hiccup's hand again. Hiccup petted him a little more, then lay down on his back and cautiously tugged the baby onto his chest. Finn tensed but didn't resist, lifting his head to peer fearfully into his father's face.

"Hey there, big guy," Hiccup said softly.

Finn buried his face in Hiccup's chest, now clutching at his father's tunic as he hummed in an unhappy way that was not quite crying anymore. Valka crawled onto Hiccup's legs and gripped his belt buckle, apparently trying to pull it off. After a minute, Hiccup carefully supported Finn as he sat up and started rocking a little. "It's all right, Finn. I love you. I would never hurt you."

Approaching footsteps made Hiccup hug Finn tighter and clutch at Valka as he looked up apprehensively. It was Astrid - but he had never seen that expression on her face before. She looked pale and shocked, even frightened, as she held out a plate of bread. Her mother stood in the background, staring at Hiccup with a similar expression. "It's all we have," Astrid whispered. "I can't sweeten it, it's all we have. This house honors you; leave us in peace."
Hiccup finally understood, and worked very hard to not burst into mirthless laughter. "I'm not dead, Astrid."

She kept staring at him.

"I'll take the bread, though. Thanks." He picked it off the plate and took a bite out of it, allowing Valka to chew on the other end.

"...Hiccup?"

"I'm not dead. I...escaped. But I'm not saying a word until I've had a good night's sleep. Speaking of which..." He gave the rest of the bread to Valka to gnaw on and put his arm around her, standing up holding both babies. Finn's grip on his tunic tightened. "The kids will be with me tonight. We'll talk tomorrow, but I can't deal with you tonight, Astrid. I can't." He turned away, relieved when she just stood there and didn't try to follow him up the stairs.

...The loft was empty.

Hiccup stared at the barren room that was no longer his. The bare bed frame and empty desk remained, but other than that, there was nothing. Hiccup went back downstairs without a word, and did not glance at his wife as he crossed the room.

There weren't many people out at this hour, and the one or two he passed seemed too drunk to notice him. He knocked at Gobber's door with his foot. There was no answer, so he knocked again, this time without stopping. Valka pounded an accompanying rhythm on his shoulders and babbled loudly.

Heavy, uneven footsteps sounded from inside, and the door was finally flung open. "If you didn't have the kids with you--" Gobber started to snarl, but then broke off. He stared much as Astrid had, though with less fear and more pain.

"I'm back," Hiccup said softly.

"Ach, lad." The man sounded close to tears. "Don't do this to me. I'll come with you in the next
raid, and gladly, but...not like this, quiet and shameful...."

This time, Hiccup didn't feel even the slightest urge to laugh. "I'm not dead, Gobber," he murmured, "and it's not your time yet. The dragons didn't kill me. I came back."

Valka let out a cranky, "Waaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhh" noise and flopped over backwards. Hiccup struggled to hold onto her, and was grateful when Gobber took the little girl out of his arm.

"Now, stop that, Val," the older man scolded gently. "You're not old enough yet to take a bump on the head and walk away laughing."

"Can we sleep here, Gobber? Astrid kicked me out...."

Gobber stared.

"I mean, she didn't 'kick me out,' per se, but...all my stuff is gone. She just.... What, the instant I left, she threw all my stuff on the garbage heap?"

"It's here," Gobber said faintly, still staring at Hiccup as if not quite convinced he wasn't a ghost. "In the back room...the forge, you know; your room, really...."

Hiccup stepped back far enough to peer into the forge, but of course it was too dark to see. He meant to go investigate, but found that he couldn't bear for his daughter to be out of his sight. "Here, give me Val back. Can you bring a candle?"

His personal belongings were, indeed, packed up in trunks and crates stacked up in the back room. "I couldn't bear to see them thrown out or given to someone else," Gobber confessed. "She asked me to pick out anything of yours that I wanted, but I took it all. I just...I couldn't...."

"I'm sorry, Gobber. I wouldn't have left if I could help it, I swear. I wanted so, so badly to come back, I wish I could have come sooner."

Gobber hugged him then, arms encircling father and children alike. Then he herded them back into his home, where Hiccup settled the children for the night and made up a bed for himself on the floor.
and told Gobber his story. "I thought I was going to die. Like, it took maybe two or three days of being terrified out of my mind before I finally realized they weren't going to eat me."

"Why didn't they eat you, lad?"

"I...I don't know, Gobber. They...they're really different. They were so different, Gobber, I don't even think they were the same flock." The more Hiccup spoke of this, the more convinced of it he became. "They can't have been the same flock. There were so many species, Gobber, more than I was able to keep track of, not just the few who always attack here. And they weren't... They were nice, Gobber."

The older man barked out a laugh.

"No, really! They...I mean...you just have to take my word for it. They weren't cruel or vicious at all. They would...they were happy, they played together and were affectionate, they were...I mean, they were like people, you know? Not monsters. Just people."

"You sound so much like your mother," Gobber murmured.

"Oh, Gobber, that's the other thing - they KNEW MOM! They knew her, they remembered her, Cloudjumper, he's that four-winged one who took her, he...he took her just like Toothless took me, Toothless is the Night Fury, but they didn't want to hurt us, they thought they were rescuing us, and Mom, she was there for a long time, I don't know how long, but she died and they missed her, the king...oh, man, the king, where do I start?"

"Hiccup," Gobber said, very quietly, "I think you ought to get some sleep now."

"What?"

"Please, lad."

"...You think I'm crazy, don't you."

Gobber sighed heavily. "All I know is that I'm glad beyond belief that you're back, but you are
breaking my heart, Hiccup."

Hiccup couldn't speak for a minute. Finally he was able to whisper, "Good night, Gobber."

"Good night, lad. If this is a dream, then it's a pretty good one."

"Mm...."

To be continued....

Author's Notes: Originally, Hiccup was going to stay in the Sanctuary continuously from the time of his abduction to the time his kids are teenagers, but I later reconsidered. I realized that the story could actually go in several different directions, and if I ever get around to doing AUs of this AU, I want to experiment with some of those alternate scenarios.

Anyway, in the end, I figured that Hiccup's personality is not entirely the same as his mother's. I was also surprised at the intensity of Hiccup's love for his children when I wrote about his interaction with them as babies, and it started becoming more and more plausible that he'd make more of an effort to return to his children than his mother did. I played with the idea for a while and managed to work it out to where I could still stick reasonably close to the overarching plot despite Hiccup successfully managing to return to his children.

Most of the research I do for my stories is frustrating, because a lot of times it's so hard to find specifically what I'm looking for at all, much less an adequate number of sources. (I was actually surprised to find as much on Christian church services in Kenya as I did - two YouTube videos are better than the nothing I expected. XD)

Carried Off is different, because much of my research for this story involves pregnancy and infant/child development - and there is SO MUCH information about that on the Internet alone, much less in books and stuff. So much. It's fantastic, I can look up anything related to babies and young children, and find many different sources for what I need. XD I'm also really glad that it occurred to me to turn to YouTube for videos of young children. My personal experience is with children ages 4-13, but I very rarely work with kids younger than 3 or 4, so YouTube was great for helping me with their physical and linguistic development and stuff. (It also helps that I have a baby niece to watch now, heh.)

Speaking of research, when I first posted this chapter, I was doing a research project on religious cults, particularly the FLDS (it started out as a personal project, but now it's doubling as preparation for Astrid's Dragon Treasure story). While responding to a review on the previous chapter, it
occurred to me that there are parallels between Hiccup (and Valka) in *Carried Off*, and some of the women who escape or are rescued from abusive cults like the FLDS. Valka is like one of those mothers who realizes that something is wrong with her community, and the price for her escape to freedom is losing her children. Hiccup is like one of those mothers who genuinely believed in her religion, was ripped away from her home against her will, thinks she's going to hell now that she's been "contaminated" by the outside world, and would willingly return to slavery if that was the only way she could be with her children, even after she's seen that the cult leaders lied about what the outside world is like. It's interesting to me how two things with no inherent connection (HTTYD and religious cults) can be linked due to particular circumstances.
Chapter 18

Carried Off, a DreamWorks' How to Train Your Dragon fanfic by Raberba girl

Chapter 18 (rough draft)

A/N: Warning for potential squick.

0.0.0

The next morning, Hiccup was awakened early by Valka's hungry yells and her brother's annoyed fussing at the noise. Hiccup took them back to his house, ignoring the amazement of the villagers he passed, but found only Astrid's mother home, and was told that his wife had been gone all night. "She's so shocked, H-Hiccup...she--"

Villagers were crowding around Hiccup by now, demanding his attention and causing anxiety to Finn and riling up Valka even more.

"All of you, shut up," Hiccup shouted. Then, taking quick advantage of the surprised but undoubtedly brief lull, "Someone find my wife, or anyone with useful breasts, and bring her here so my kids can get fed."

"AAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!" Valka emphasized.

"I'm here," a voice called. Astrid shoved her way through the crowd and came to a stop in front of her family. She looked like she had been out in the woods throwing axes all night. She seemed to want to just stand there and stare at him, but Hiccup ignored her regard and handed over Valka.

Astrid glared around at the crowd as she adjusted her clothing to accommodate her hungry daughter. "Seriously, all of you shut up. Mom, Gobber, Hiccup, Fishlegs, inside, and someone go get Gothi and Phlegma. The rest of you, get lost, there's work to do. I'll tell you what's going on as soon as I know." Then, when most of them were slow to obey, "GET LOST."

The little group gathered around inside the chieftain's house, Astrid still feeding Valka as Hiccup comforted Finn, trying to feed the hungry boy bits of mashed up food until it was his turn to nurse.
“Talk, Hiccup.”

He did, telling them what had happened to him without revealing any information they could use to find the king’s nest and hurt the flock. Hiccup often spoke in croons, his words meant for the adult listeners but his tone and eyes and expression meant for his babies.

“How many new species were there?” Fishlegs asked eagerly, pencil poised over his notebook.

“Hundreds,” Hiccup cooed at Valka, who was in his lap by now as Finn took his turn to feed. “Sooooo many, I couldn't keep track.”

“I really do think it had to have been a different flock altogether,” Fishlegs mused. "If that's true, then what Hiccup says might have some merit. Maybe there's something wrong specifically with the Helheim's Gate flock, but other dragons actually--"

“Let’s not waste time with useless speculation,” Astrid said, exasperated by the way Hiccup in the flesh kept not fitting with her impressions of him when he'd still been ‘dead.' She could not understand why he had no interest in pursuit or vengeance. "Hiccup, I know you're not stupid. You can tell me something, at least! What direction were you headed when it flew off with you?"

“I don't know~” Hiccup sing-songed, lifting Valka up and down and up and down as she kicked her feet and laughed. "I was too scared out of my mind~ to pay attention to directions~"

“Did the Night Fury really have retractable teeth?” Fishlegs asked eagerly.

“Yup~"

“How big was this 'king' dragon?” Phlegma asked, businesslike.

Hiccup paused, finally looking directly at the adults. "Don't even think about it. It'd be like trying to kill a mountain. You can't. Physically impossible. You can't."
Astrid snorted.

"Astrid, he is HALF THE SIZE OF BERK, and he can read minds. He'd probably sense you coming and send out troops to wipe out whatever puny fleet we could muster up to send against him. That is, if he doesn't come out himself and just bat the ships to pieces. Like a kid playing bashyball, it'd be as easy for him as that."

"You don't think much of us, do you!" Astrid said angrily. "We're Vikings! We've earned our reputation, there's no one we can't take on and win!"

Hiccup stared at her silently, disgusted, wishing there was some way for him to take his children and return to the dragon king's nest forever.

"Don't give me that look," Astrid growled.

"You have no idea what you're talking about," Hiccup said in a deliberate sort of way, lifting his head in challenge. He was pretty sure she wouldn't attack him in front of witnesses whose respect she most needed, especially while she and he were both holding their children.

Astrid's fist clenched as she seemed to be visibly trying to restrain herself.

"C-Could we try, maybe, an ambush of some kind?" Fishlegs tried to intervene nervously.


"Ridiculous," Phlegma scoffed. "How do we know you're not just making all this up, boy?"

"Yes, I totally planned to get carried off by a Night Fury. I have totally valid reasons for lying about something like this. What are those reasons, by the way? Do tell, since I seem to have forgotten."

The woman scowled. "You've always been mad, boy. How should I know how a child of Loki thinks?"
Hiccup gritted his teeth and curled his left hand protectively.

"This is the man who spent four years trying to take down a Night Fury," Gobber growled, "who thought he could slay dragons even though he couldn't lift a hammer or swing an axe, and who would've gone through dragon training if his father hadn't been an overprotective worrier. If he says we ought to have second thoughts about taking on this dragon king of his in battle, I think we'd be stupid not to listen."

Hiccup shot him a grateful look. Finn, fussing now that he'd finished eating, was handed back to him, and he returned most of his attention to his children.

"We ought to be focusing more on our own troubles than on Hiccup's mystery flock," Astrid's mother said. "It's the dragons of Helheim's Gate that are the problem. We can't afford to waste resources attacking an entirely different flock who mostly steer clear of us, anyway."

Gothi started drawing symbols for Gobber and Fishlegs, who leaned closer to inspect them. "She says that we should be thankful for the return of our blacksmith, and that sometimes madmen are so because of the touch of the divine on their fates," Gobber translated.

"We really do need you, Hiccup," Fishlegs said, glancing a little sheepishly at Gobber. "It was starting to get pretty bad.... He's got only one arm, you know; and he's...not getting any younger...."

"It's only the truth," Gobber grumbled.

"I know, I get it," Hiccup sighed. "I exist to fix your weapons and keep house for the chief. I never said I wasn't fine with that."

There was an awkward pause.

"So," Astrid's mother concluded, "now that we have Hiccup back, it doesn't really seem to matter where he's actually been or what he's been up to all this time or how he escaped."

Fishlegs looked troubled. "We're just going to keep doing what we've always been doing...?"
"What do we tell the rest of the village?" Phlegma asked. "There's no way anyone's going to give credence to this ridiculous story of his."

"Why not?" Hiccup challenged. No one answered him, and only Gobber, Fishlegs, and Gothi even bothered to glance at him.

Astrid sighed. "We'll say that when he got carried off, the Fury got shot down midflight by...I don't know, Bogs, who held Hiccup captive for breeding stock until he managed to seduce his way to freedom."

Hiccup stared at her incredulously.

Phlegma snorted. "No one would believe that - the boy couldn't seduce his way out of a barrel of mackerel. And who'd want a runt for stud, anyway?"

"My husband has already sired a healthy son and daughter," Astrid snarled, "and is quite capable of satisfying a woman in bed when he chooses to." There was another long pause.

"Outcasts," Astrid's mother finally suggested. "He wouldn't need to seduce anyone in that version."

'It's not enough that I'm secretly a woman's bed-slave in real life,' Hiccup thought angrily, 'now I also get raped by Outcasts in my publicly announced fake escape scenario? Yes, that'll do wonders for my reputation.'

Before he could settle on a strategic way to say this, Gobber gave voice to his outrage. "You can't do that to him! He's held in low enough esteem already, a story like that would completely destroy him!"

"Meatheads," Fishlegs offered. "They used to be our closest allies before...well, you know.... Maybe they let him go out of respect to-- Er, the last chief. Or he talked his way out of it, or tricked them. Or something."

Everyone looked at Hiccup again, who ignored them as he played with the babies.
"The boy does have a tongue on him," Phlegma commented. "He could trick a particularly stupid guard."

There was a general noise of mild assent.

"Are we done with this little 'Hiccup is a crazy liar' session?" Hiccup said. "Because I want to get back to my real work. I've missed the forge." 'Getting to craft things the way I want them, instead of having to constantly make do with scraps....'

An official announcement was made about the cover story for Hiccup's abduction and return. Despite that, it seemed like everyone in the village kept eagerly coming up to interrogate Hiccup in the forge, and he started making a game out of feeding them increasingly wild stories. "Oh, you know, it wasn't a big deal, the Night Fury was charmed by my might and charisma...I fought my way single-handed past a hundred dragons and then paddled back home on a raft I made from driftwood...Thor himself descended from Asgard and brought me to safety...."

He still couldn't bear to let the twins out of his sight even for a moment, and Gobber, smiling and whistling cheerfully, similarly stayed close to him as well. The man didn't leave Hiccup's side until late that night after supper, when Astrid gave a meaningful look to him and her mother. "Mom, Gobber...do you think I could have some time alone with my family?"

Both of them seemed very reluctant to leave, but they eventually did so. Hiccup was oblivious, wholly absorbed by the babies, looking peaceful and content.

At last, Astrid was alone with her husband and children. She watched them for a while, Finn asleep in his cradle, Valka in Hiccup's arms, babbling cheerfully at him as he crooned and murmured back.

He was unbelievably attractive. Still as skinny as ever, but that didn't seem to matter anymore. He had taken on a new light in Astrid's eyes, as a brave man who, despite his frustrating idiosyncrasies, was strong in his own way, too strong to be overcome by an iron-willed woman, too strong for a Night Fury, too strong for death. Strong and yet incredibly tender, touching and caressing his children as if they were the most precious treasures on earth.

Astrid, watching him at that moment, wanted him intensely. She craved her slender, soft-spoken husband more than any fantasy man she had ever dreamed of in the past. "Hiccup."

"Hm?"
She approached cautiously, as if he was a not-quite-tame horse. "So...." She knelt and lightly put her arms around him. "I suppose you've been through quite an ordeal...."

"I missed them sooooo much," Hiccup sighed, nuzzling Valka's cheek like a dragon. "So much...I could have been so happy there if not for them, but knowing they were here without me made me feel like I was dying inside...."

Astrid hesitated. "You're here now."

"I'm back, precious," Hiccup whispered tenderly to his daughter. "I will never, ever leave you again."

"Hiccup...as soon as she's asleep...you'll come to bed, right?"

He looked at her, finally picking up on her longing. His eyes widened.

"I missed you," she said softly.

He swallowed. "I.... You didn't...you didn't find a lover when I was...away...?"

She frowned. "No."

He was staring at her so helplessly, it was a little insulting, that he seemed to have expected her to move right on to another man the instant he was gone (as if there were even any options...). "Why not?"

She tugged him close and kissed him gently. "Because I wanted you."

He kept staring at her.

"I've always wanted you, Hiccup."
"Always?" he said dubiously.

"...Well, for a long time."

Valka stirred curiously between them.

Hiccup's breath was coming a little faster, though apparently not from desire. "N-Not...not tonight, Astrid, please...."

"What?"

He leaned away, hugging Valka. "Please. It's not you, it's me, I can't...I really don't...I can't...."

She frowned.

"I'll make it up to you, I promise," he said hurriedly. "As soon as I.... I just.... Please, Astrid. Not tonight."

She tried so hard to be patient and understanding. "Why not?"

"I...I'm tired."

"...Fine, then, the sex can wait. But at least come sleep with me."

He turned away, still hugging Valka as if she was a child's comforting toy.

"I just want to feel your body lying beside mine, Hiccup! I just want...I need you. I need you, Hiccup."
"I need them," he pleaded. "Just one night, Astrid. Give me one night with them, and then I'll...I'll try."

She glared at him for a minute, disappointed and frustrated, as well as baffled by the genuine fear in his eyes. Why in the world was he afraid?

He was still clutching Valka, and now had the sleeping Finn cradled in his other arm. A thought occurred to Astrid. "You don't want to have sex, or you don't want to leave the kids?"

Now he was the one who looked confused. "What?"

She took hold of his shoulders and gently tugged him to his feet and over to the bed without trying to take the children away from him.

"Wha--?" She pushed him down, and he stared at her. "I-- I don't want...?"

"You can hold on to them the whole time, for all I care. But you don't mind the actual sex part, right?"

He stared at her a minute longer, then burst into a quiet peal of incredulous laughter. "You are addicted!" he realized.

"Yes," she growled, sobering him instantly. "I am." She saw the protective way he clutched the children, so she tried to soften her voice. "I hate that I am, but there's nothing I can do about it, and you're here, and...I don't care if they are, too. I don't want to force you, but...you'll let me? Like this?" She tried not to let her tone sound as desperate as she felt.

"This is ridiculous," he chuckled darkly, but then said, "Whatever. Fine."

She exhaled in relief and started tugging at his clothes.

"Wait, wait--!" As his pants were being unfastened and pulled down, he hastily set the awake baby to one side and carefully laid down the sleeping one on the other. "Okay, Finn, shhh, stay asleep," he said in the softest of whispers before turning to his daughter, who was sitting up and watching
curiously. "Hey, Val, hey--" He reached for her and smiled when she grasped his arm until Astrid's ministrations snatched his attention. "Aah!"

"Aah," Valka imitated.

"Okay," Hiccup panted, "okay, this is so - acgh! - awkward--"

"Stop squirming, Hiccup," Astrid complained as she tried to mount him.

"Just give me two seconds to get the kids settled!" he exclaimed, dragging the baby back up before she could crawl over to investigate. Val protested indignanty, so he distracted her by ruffling her hair, and she took the opportunity to bite his wrist.

Hiccup had never in his life had to multitask to such an extent. The sensations in his groin and his wife's soft moans were an insistant distraction as he used one hand to muffle his own noises and the other to keep Val entertained and at bay.

She seemed fascinated by the involuntary twitching and clenching of his fingers, and shifted her bite accordingly. Hiccup knew that she was simply examining something interesting in her innocent baby way, but it still made him uneasy to let his daughter suck his fingers while he was having sex, so he gently tugged his hand free and groped toward the nightstand, looking for a substitute.

Val screeched a protest at the loss of her toy, which made Finn start to fuss a little. Hiccup comforted the sleepy baby with his arm until Finn settled a little. At the same time, struggling through the unrelenting waves of physical pleasure, he made a dragonlike sound at Valka. She seemed pleased enough with the funny sound and however his face was contorted to momentarily stop her yelling.

A few moments were all he needed. His seeking fingers finally closed on something - the candle holder. He couldn't give Val the current candle, since the wax drippings would probably break off and choke her, but it did give him the idea to reach just a little farther and grab the spare candle, which had never been lit. This he offered to Val, who seemed interested enough in the new texture of her replacement chew toy that she didn't protest its inanimate nature too much.

Astrid panted, amazed, "How can you...take care of two babies...when you're doing this...at the same time...?!"
Already stretched too thin, Hiccup didn't even try to answer.

*To be continued....*
Chapter 19

Carried Off, a DreamWorks' How to Train Your Dragon fanfic by Raberba girl

Chapter 19 (rough draft)

There were a few changes, such as that, in practice, Hiccup now lived at Gobber's place with the babies. Most of his interactions with his wife in what was technically their own home pretty much consisted of only two activities, which made him feel like he was bartering sex for breast milk. Hiccup's abduction and escape also seemed to have transformed him somewhat from an object of scorn into an interesting freak. Otherwise, life quickly settled back into a routine.

Until the next dragon raid.

Hiccup couldn't work at all. He got yelled at by both Astrid and Gobber until he pled trauma from his abduction, then crouched uselessly in a corner of the forge, clutching his babies and staring out at the invading force in fresh horror and desperate, painful confusion.

There was something wrong with these dragons. Now that he knew what real dragons were like, he could tell that there was something WRONG with these creatures who mercilessly pillaged and stole and destroyed and hurt. 'You can see it in their eyes...it's like they're not even there. It's like monsters have stolen their bodies and are using them to hurt us. ...Where did their souls go?'

Afterward, he tried to make up for his lack of help in the forge during the battle by throwing himself without complaint into medical care and repair efforts. He went to bed exhausted that night, even later than Astrid did. He worked hard again all the next day and took longer getting to sleep that night. He thought for a long time. In the morning, he asked Astrid if he could relieve the caretaker of the captive dragons whenever he had a chance.

She stared at him. "Dragons scare you to death."

He fidgeted resentfully. "No...not really...."

"Then what were you doing cowering on the floor the last raid?" she demanded.

Oh. "Well, I mean, okay, I was traumatized a bit, but I want to, uh...face my fears, you know?"
And...conquer them.” He had always been a lousy liar when he was unsure of himself, but she didn't seem to scrutinize him too closely.

"Whatever. You are impossible. Just...just don't shirk in the forge, and be here when I need you in the evenings; otherwise, I don't care what you do anymore, Hiccup. I will never understand you."

"Okay," he said restlessly, losing interest in speaking to her now that he'd gotten what he wanted.

"And don't you dare get yourself carried off again," she said sharply.

"I won't!"

Once again, the babies caused a dilemma for him. If Hiccup had been on his own, he would not have hesitated to walk straight into the arena unarmed, but he had his children to think of.

'Well,' he amended, 'I guess technically, it's my own fault, not theirs...'. The separation anxiety he had developed since his abduction was crippling...he still couldn't bear to be too far away from his children. He had improved enough that he could now tolerate having sex with his wife while the babies were simply in the same room rather than having to actually be in the bed with them, but he still couldn't stand to truly leave his children, even for an hour.

'Make a choice, Haddock,' he told himself. 'Figure out what's wrong with the dragons and put your kids in mortal danger, or give in to your own selfish cowardice and let these poor draugr keep terrorizing your people. It'll only be a matter of time before Finn or Val becomes one of the casualties. ...Or, take a third option and solve the mystery while keeping your kids safe. No-brainer, right? RIGHT, HADDOCK?'

It was one of the hardest things he had ever done. He wept as he gave his children into Gobber's care, and couldn't leave for a while as he hugged and kissed them. Finn cried, easily picking up on his distress; Valka loudly indicated her disapproval of his mood.

"I'll come back...I'll come back, I'll come back, I'll come back...."
"You don't have to do this, Hiccup," Gobber said hesitantly. He had no idea where the young man was going, but he couldn't stand to see the last three people he cared about in tears.

"It never ends...I wish Toothless really had torn out my guts, that's what this feels like, it's what my whole life always, always feels like...."

He made it to the arena, but then he just lay curled up in the middle of it, desperately alone, feeling like his heart was bleeding in a great unseen pool around him. ...It would mingle with the old bloodstains he started to notice on the floor.

Dragons' blood. Countless creatures slain here, feeling all the anguish in their bodies that he was feeling in his soul now.

Hiccup lay quietly, feeling strangely in tune with the ghosts of these creatures. He listened to the rustling and occasional muffled growls of their living counterparts, still locked behind heavy doors.

'So much pain. This war has cost you just as much as it has us. ...Why do you keep at it? ...What is your nest like?' A horrible thought struck him. 'What is your king like?!' He sat up, breathing hard. The king he'd met had always fed his people so that they had no need to raid and pillage. But if the nest hiding in the dark mists of Helheim's Gate was anything like the nest in the Sanctuary, it would have its own king, its own hopelessly massive, mind-reading titan ruler....

Hiccup rushed home, reclaimed his children, shut himself in the forge's back room with them, and scribbled furiously in a fresh notebook until his hand ached. 'We've never been at war with them. We've been at war with IT. That THING, that physically-impossible-to-kill THING is a failure of a ruler, it's been sending them against us all this time, it's making us do its job for it, it will never, ever stop until we have nothing left to steal, until we're all dead....'

The next afternoon, he tore himself away from his babies again and went back to the arena, which was far from the hub of the village and therefore deserted when there was no training or events going on. He set a piece of fish down outside one of the pens, then released the dragon.

The Terrible Terror came rushing out, snarling fiercely until he literally tripped over the fish. He instantly whirled and devoured the food in one gulp. Before he could get his bearings, Hiccup tossed another piece of fish, and the tiny dragon devoured that one, too. He raised his head and fixed his bulbous eyes on Hiccup. Before he could decide how to respond to the quiet, food-dispensing human, Hiccup threw another morsel. Then he sat down.
After the Terror had swallowed the third offering, he came trotting over to Hiccup and paused, gazing at him warily and a little curiously. Hiccup didn't move. He felt relatively safe, since he had taken the precaution of wearing gloves and a helmet with a visor to cover his face, so that there was no exposed skin for the little dragon to bite with its venomous fangs.

The Terror sniffed at him.

"Hi there."

The dragon climbed into his lap like an awkward lizard-puppy. Hiccup cautiously petted him. The dragon rested his chin on Hiccup's knee and relaxed. Hiccup hesitated, then removed his glove and scratched the bases of the dragon's horns. The little creature purred and butted his hand for more. Hiccup smiled and obliged. "You're just fine when you're out of your king's thrall and not being chased around and yelled at and jabbed with scary pointy things, aren't you." The dragon crooned in response.

Hiccup petted him for a while longer. Then he lured the animal back into the pen with another piece of fish, returned to his children, and stayed up writing and sketching in his new dragon notebook until the wee hours of the morning.

Even though Hiccup felt fairly confident now about what he was doing, there was still a good chance that he'd screw up (he was Hiccup, after all...) and get himself killed by one of the bigger dragons. Before he returned to the arena the next day, he updated his will and wrote letters to both of his children, entrusting the sealed documents to Gobber. Then he headed off with his notebook in hand.

He was a little inclined in favor of the Gronckle, since the mother dragon who had carried him the last leg of his journey home had been one of that species. He took a deep breath and opened the beast's pen.

She came tearing out much as the Terror had, looking around wild-eyed before her eyes fell on Hiccup. She charged at him. He couldn't help backing up against the wall in alarm, but he kept his hands up unthreateningly.

He was horrified when she opened her glowing mouth, but then she paused before blasting him. She
sniffed at his lap, where the Terrible Terror had rested the day before. The Gronckle growled warily, but Hiccup could see fear in her eyes.

Speaking of eyes. They’d changed, just as Toothless’s had months ago. The pupils had been slitted with fear and fury; now they were wider, warmer. "Welcome back," Hiccup whispered. He let his hand hover in front of her heaving nostrils for a minute. Then he very gently laid his palm on her face.

Once he had gained her trust, she lay down heavily beside him and leaned against him, not responding to his attempts to engage her. He finally realized that it seemed to be comfort she sought, and when he caressed her soothingly, she nuzzled into him, seeking more. "You're so sad," he murmured, his heart swelling with compassion. "Are you a mother, too, like my friend out there? Did you leave babies behind when you were captured, like I did?” It was a horrible thought that struck him to the core. He found himself leaning over her and weeping, aching for his children even now, and she joined in his tears with a high, keening sound of grief. They cried together for a long time.

The Nadder responded well to praise and compliments, and seemed to be most relaxed when he avoided her blind spot and allowed her to examine him to her satisfaction. The Nightmare gave him the biggest scare at first, but curiosity eventually won out over battle lust, and Hiccup got the second-most feared dragon of the invading flock to channel his energy into games. The Zippleback was the hardest to win over, almost disdainfully keeping his (their?) distance even after Hiccup managed to convince him/them that he meant no harm, but even the unimpressed two-headed dragon did no more than wreathe him in gas and spark threateningly, without actually going so far as to blow him up.

Hiccup fed them and talked to them and petted them and played with them and tended their wounds whenever warriors came to use them for training. Hiccup also did some training of his own, teaching the dragons things like to confine their licking to certain areas of his body rather than indiscriminately glopping drool all over him (a particular problem with the Gronckle), how to find alternatives to marking him that didn’t involve biting (a rather urgent problem with the Nightmare), how to fetch various items and bring them to him (the Nadder seemed particularly fond of this activity), and how to wait their turn if more than one dragon was out of its pen at feeding time (the Terror never seemed to master this particular lesson).

Hiccup had started letting them out in pairs once they were all used to him individually. They seemed delighted to be able to interact with each other, nearly hurting him a few times by accident in their exuberance at being reunited with their own kind. At last, Hiccup let all five dragons out of their pens at the same time. They milled around him, vocalizing happily and rubbing and licking scent onto him, the Nadder preening him and the Gronckle nuzzling him with particular affection.
He might as well have been back at the Sanctuary. These were real dragons, their souls restored, their eyes full of life and warmth. These dragons would never hurt him. Their fallen king could not reach them here, they were not Hiccup's enemies.

Still, it was a whole week before the young Viking convinced himself that it was all right to bring his children to the arena with him. The dragons instantly picked up on his anxiety and grew more agitated in response, and he clutched his babies hard and prayed that if he'd miscalculated, he would get killed as well, instead of having to live with the agony of knowing that he'd brought his own children to their deaths.

There had been no need to worry. Hound, the Gronckle, picked up the babies' scent first and cried out in delight, and Reign the Nadder eagerly shoved her way forward, and Gecko the Terror clambered to Hiccup's shoulders so he could get a better look, and the twins became the center of loving draconic attention.

Valka was utterly delighted. Volcano the Nightmare soon claimed her and carried her around proudly, uncharacteristically gentle. Hiccup was surprised and relieved when Finn didn't seem to be upset. Indeed, as the baby was licked by Hound, he kept trying to reach up to grab the Gronckle's tongue, babbling in confusion and growing annoyance every time his tiny hands slid right off the slippery muscle.

Hiccup felt tears of relief and joy sliding down his face. Dragons really were people. Even the dragons of Helheim's Gate were people, simply locked in some sort of prison of the mind that they could be freed from. He could trust them not only with his own life, but with his most precious treasures.

The joy slowly faded to dismay as he watched confirmation that everything his people had known about dragons was wrong - that, for centuries now, oceans of blood had been spilled for nothing.

To be continued....

Author's Notes: I was lazy and gave the captive dragons in this AU the same personalities and sexes as the canon ones.
Chapter 20

Carried Off, a DreamWorks' How to Train Your Dragon fanfic by Raberba girl

Chapter 20 (rough draft)

Hiccup hadn't thought ahead far enough.

"I heard that you've taken over at the arena completely."

Hiccup looked up at his wife, not realizing that the spoonful of gloppy food he was holding had paused on its way to Finn's mouth. The baby made an irritated noise and leaned forward a little to reach. "Huh?"

"The dragons," Astrid said in mild exasperation. "Apparently you've been doing all the feeding and stuff lately. I'm actually pretty impressed - I know you've got a full plate already with the forge and the kids and everything else, I don't even know how you find time for a second job."

"Yeah...I like the work," Hiccup muttered, now trying to maneuver a spoonful of food into Valka's mouth while avoiding her flailing hands.

"That's nice. I hope you don't like it too much, though, since you'll be getting a long break soon."

"What?"

The exasperated look was back. "Winter, Hiccup. Winter's coming."

He accidentally dropped the spoon. He was instantly on his hands and knees to clean up the splattered morsel of food, so that Astrid wouldn't see the horrified look on his face.

Hiccup couldn't believe he'd forgotten. The Hooligans barely had enough food for themselves to survive, there was no way they could keep feeding five dragons throughout the barren winters. One of the dragon caretaker's duties was to slaughter each batch of captives at the approach of the darkest time of year.
Hiccup immediately knew that he couldn't do it. Hound and the others were his friends now, killing them would be murder. He would not stain his hands, or anyone else's, with their blood.

His face was perfectly composed by the time he emerged from under the table.

"Are you all right?" Astrid asked.

"Yeah."

"I can send someone to help you--"

"Nope, it's fine, I can handle it. Thanks for the offer, though."

"Are you sure?" she said dubiously.

"It's not like I have to take them on in a fair fight. I can poison them or something."

"No. I don't want to waste food on that."

"Darts, Astrid. I don't have to poison their food, I just have to get it into their bloodstream."

"Fine. I'll put together a sign-up list for everyone who wants some last-minute practice and try to get it to you in a couple of days."

"Okay. Thanks."

The deadline was not immediate, since there was still more than a week's worth of food rations for
the dragons. Unfortunately, the warriors tended to squeeze in extra training during the last bit of availability, which made it a little more nerve-wracking for Hiccup to plan.

He also wanted, before he did anything drastic, to see if he could change the villagers' minds about dragons. He started with Gobber. "Hey...so, you know my friend I was telling you about?"

"Friend?" Gobber said, looking baffled.

"Yeah.... You know, Toothless," Hiccup clarified, trying to sound casual. "My Night Fury friend."

Gobber lowered his hammer and gave Hiccup a hard look.

"I'm not crazy, Gobber," Hiccup said softly. "I know it's hard to understand, especially for you all who've been fighting dragons for so much longer than my generation has, but--"

"I loved your mother," Gobber said gruffly, "she was one of my best friends, and I'm glad you reminded your dad of her. But, Hiccup, she started crossing a line that no one ought to cross, and...not all the ways you take after her are for the best."

Hiccup took a deep breath, trying to stay calm. "Gobber...what if Mom was right?"

The glint in the older man's eyes was all ice and pain. "They've taken everything from me, Hiccup. They kept taking everything one by one, and then they took your dad. That broke me, but it still wasn't enough for them. They took you, too, and sometimes I think they'll probably come back for you. They won't stop until they've completely destroyed me. They're very close now, lad. It's too late."

"...I've flown among the clouds, Gobber," Hiccup said hopelessly. "If you ever get the chance to do that, you'll know. Dragons are--"

Gobber turned away and resumed work without a word.

Hiccup tried Fishlegs next, the only one in the village who seemed to be fascinated by dragons as a little more than just savage enemies to be destroyed. "I wonder if these wing/fin things are
Fishlegs seemed to believe everything Hiccup said-- At least, he was eager to listen. It wasn't until Hiccup started talking about trying to befriend the dragons and break them of the mind control that Fishlegs's face started to fall.

"We can do it, Legs," Hiccup insisted. "And if we deprive the Helheim king of enough of his minions, then--"

"Hiccup," Fishlegs said very quietly, and Hiccup already knew he had lost. "I...I don't think you're...really aware of the scale of a project like this. Or how much we'd be risking and how much there is to lose.... We're barely holding on as it is, I--"

"I get it, Fishlegs. Thanks for listening."

He had no hope left, but he tried Astrid anyway. Instead of leaving as soon as they were finished that night, he stayed to cuddle with her in bed afterward, and she seemed a little surprised but in too good a mood to question why his arms stayed around her. "Astrid," he whispered.

"Mm," she murmured in contentment.

"I have to ask you something...."

She sighed, tensing slightly as she realized that of course there was an ulterior motive. Between the two of them, nothing was ever given for free. "What is it?" she mumbled into his shoulder.

He was silent for a while, stroking a thumb back and forth across her cheek. Finally he said, "I wish you could believe me about the dragons."

"They're monsters, Hiccup," she said warily. "You know this, at least you did before. They don't know how to do anything except steal and kill and destroy."

"Maybe their leader does, okay. But they wouldn't be able to resist him, Astrid. He could force
them to do things they *wouldn't do* otherwise, they--"

She sat up and glared a warning at him.

He hurriedly sat up as well. "We can...if we release them far enough north, maybe they'll be out of range of that thing's influence, maybe they can make their way to--"

"Release who?" Astrid said, her voice dangerous.

Hiccup swallowed. "I can...I can show you. They're so gentle now."

"*Who*, Hiccup."

That was not a voice to be disobeyed or put off. "The...dragons. In the arena."

After a long silence, she said in the same tone, "I don't know what you're up to, but it needs to stop *right now*. ...I should probably appoint someone else as caretaker."

He tried to control his panic, and managed to shrug fairly nonchalantly. "It'll be a hassle trying to fill the post so close to the end of the season. By the time I teach the new guy what to do with the beasts and make sure he's got all those last-minute training sign-ups sorted out, it'll be the end, anyway."

Astrid considered a moment, then pointed straight at his chest. "Don't try anything. Don't be *you* for just one week, Hiccup."

"I'll try, chief."

"Please leave."

"Good night." He got dressed and carefully picked up his sleeping daughter. Finn lay awake but quiet, sucking his thumb as he gazed at the fire. Hiccup carried the children away, ignoring Astrid's suspicious expression.
Hiccup didn't manage to find an opportunity to save the arena dragons before there was another raid. He could not bring himself to repair and supply weapons that would be used to kill enslaved creatures, so instead of helping Gobber in the forge, he unflinchingly allowed himself to be branded a coward, taking the twins and hiding with the village children in the cave shelter. He took up a shield and dagger and claimed a spot guarding the entrance, but even the ten- and eleven-year-olds doing the same glared at him distastefully and moved away. He stared straight ahead without acknowledging their snubs.

Very rarely had a dragon ever been known to find the shelter. The loss of even one child from such incidents was even rarer, to such an extent that there were no confirmed instances of it ever actually happening.

In any case, the young guards were really just a precaution, thus no one was prepared to see the head of a Monstrous Nightmare suddenly dip down into the cave entrance and growl.

The children immediately burst into terrified screams, prompting the Nightmare to light itself on fire. Hiccup, getting over an initial moment of shock, flung away his weapon and his shield and walked toward the dragon with his arms outstretched, as if to shield both parties from each other. "Nothing to worry about, kids," he called amiably over his shoulder.

"AAAAAHHHHH!"

"We're gonna die we're gonna die we're gonna diiiiiiiieeeeee!"

"MOM! I WANT MY MOM!"

"Someone help us!!"

Hiccup halted before coming too close to the Nightmare and looked up at it with averted eyes. "Noisy bunch, aren't they," he remarked.

The dragon rumbled warily.
Hiccup raised his hand for the dragon to sniff, still not making eye contact. "My name's Hiccup. Can you smell my friends on me? Old flockmates of yours, huh?"

The dragon sniffed, then dropped to the ground and approached to investigate him more closely. Some of the children, especially near the back of the cave, were still screaming or crying, but most of them were staring, mesmerized.

"There's no food here," Hiccup said softly, venturing to scratch the same spot on the dragon's head that he knew Volcano liked. The Nightmare made a pleased croaking sound. "Just little ones. Only human hatchlings, that's all. Go away, please?" He stepped back and made a slow and exaggerated shooing motion with his arms.

The Monstrous Nightmare shook its head, then turned and flew away.

Some of the children who hadn't been crying now burst into tears; some of those who had previously been crying were now anxiously asking those with better views what had happened. Others were simply staring at Hiccup in confusion and distrust.

Hiccup met their gazes steadily. "Dragons don't want to hurt us. Someone bad is making them do it. If we help them and set them free, they can be our friends."

"Dragon-lover." One of the older children spat the words like a curse. "Filthy dragon-lover." The phrase circulated among the group in murmurs, then suddenly it became a hostile chant. "Dragon-lover! Dragon-lover! Dragon-lover!"

Hiccup picked up his children and walked away.

Hiccup finally managed to find an opportunity before the food ran out, early on a clear, cold evening. He let all the dragons out of their pens and fed them the last of the food and caressed them sadly. Hound, Gecko, and Reign stuck particularly close to him as if they could sense his disquiet.

"This is goodbye, guys, Hiccup said softly. "I probably won't ever see you again, but as long as you
survive, that's all right. Live, and fly. Fly far away from your monster and my monsters, and be safe." He walked over to the open gate and gestured, a little surprised that none of them had noticed it.

None of them took off right away. They simply stared at the gate for a while, wide-eyed, then Reign very cautiously tiptoed to the threshold to examine it.

Volcano suddenly rushed past her and took flight. He crowed his joy to the sky, and Hiccup's heart soared to watch him.

A minute later, the Zippleback lumbered past, one head pausing to exhale fondly over Hiccup as the other head vocalized. Then that dragon was gone as well.

The others wouldn't leave. "Guys...guys, come on, you need to get out of here. I think they saw Volcano take off, they'll be here soon." Hiccup tried walking outside the gate, but Gecko just stayed perched on his shoulders. The two bigger dragons simply followed him and stopped walking when he did. "I'm serious, you need to go!"

All three animals suddenly stiffened in alarm, heads turned toward the village. "They're coming," Hiccup said urgently. "You need to go, and I can't be caught with you."

Vikings appeared at the other end of the path, breaking into shouts when they saw the dragons loose. Hiccup saw them and dashed away a few steps, which dislodged the Terror. Gecko tumbled into the air with a squawk, then turned his back in a miffed sort of way and flew off. Hiccup flapped his hands at Hound and Reign. "You too, girls! You too! Go! Hound, you have children who are waiting for you, how dare you abandon them!"

The Gronckle, looking torn, let out a devastated cry and launched into the air. Reign simply huddled closer to Hiccup, her wings twitching with fear and the spines on her tail standing erect.

"GO!" Hiccup slapped his hands hard against the reluctant Nadder.

All the dragons escaped in the end. Hiccup did not. He didn't resist as he was dragged back to the village and shoved to his knees before the chief and accused of treachery.

"Hiccup!"
He refused to look at her.

"Hiccup, how could you--?! I thought the kids were just making up stories about what you did during that raid, but this, Hiccup...!"

'What will happen to my children?' he wondered in distress. 'How will she punish me?' He didn't think he could bear being locked up for too long, endless hours or days or perhaps weeks away from his children, but he would not protest. The dragons' lives had been worth it.

Astrid's hand seized his face and jerked his head up, forcing him to meet her furious eyes. "You betrayed us. You've sided with them."

"All I did was save my friends from being murdered. They won't bother us again, they--"

"You just set free five monsters who were in our grasp! Every scrap they take from now on, every burn and every drop of shed blood, will be your fault, Hiccup."

"They won't--!"

"Aaagghh!" She turned away and screamed in fury, pacing in a little circle with her hands buried in her hair, then came to a stop and glared at him with an expression of pure poison. He gazed back calmly until someone put a mace into her hand.

Astrid stared at the weapon in her grasp for a minute. Hiccup's whole body flooded with heat, physically horrified as he realized he was about to die, but inside he felt completely numb, unable to summon a single thought or emotion.

After a very long moment, Astrid flung the weapon aside and strode forward to strike Hiccup hard across the face. "You are the enemy," she hissed. "You are not one of us. ...You have never been one of us."

"A...Astrid...please, I--"
"Put him in a boat," she snapped. "Phlegma, you're coming with us."

Hiccup had felt nothing in reaction to the threat of death, but now panic and horror seized him as he realized he was being exiled. "Astrid, please!" He couldn't stop them from dragging him to the pier, no matter how hard he struggled. "NO! Astrid, don't do this, at least let me take them, please, at least let me take them with me, please, Astrid, please...!"

Astrid, light-headed with shock and fury and turmoil, had only intended to bring her advisor along, to help ground her emotionally and also to help physically subdue the prisoner if necessary. She did not expect Gobber to come toward her with her children in his arms. "Go back to work, Gobber. My mother will look after the twins."

"He has the right to say goodbye to them," the man ground out.

"He has no rights at all anymore."

Gobber looked her square in the eye. "Finn and Val and I are coming with you. You will not deny us our farewells, Astrid, or else you'll be finding yourself short two smiths instead of just one."

Astrid ground her teeth, but there was nothing she could counter that with. She turned on her heel and marched away.

As soon as Hiccup saw Gobber approaching with the babies, he called out frantically and strained toward them, held back by Phlegma's grip. As soon as Gobber stepped into the boat, Hiccup snatched for his children, wrapping his arms around them and nuzzling their faces. Valka screeched and clutched hard at his hair; Finn flailed at him and cried. He held them close during the whole journey, bent over them and rocking slightly, crooning, trying to memorize their faces and their scent and their softness and every one of their sweet sounds and movements.

When the boat reached Exile Rock, Hiccup refused to move, and Phlegma had to hold him down as Astrid pried the children out of his arms. He screamed and begged, abandoning every scrap of pride as the women dragged him ashore. "Please, Astrid, please, I'll do anything, I'll do anything, please don't take my children, please, Astrid, please--"

"They are no longer your children, Outcast," Astrid snarled at him. "Traitor. You're as good as a murderer. If you are ever seen in Hooligan territory again, you will be killed on sight."
"Please...Astrid...please...." He clung to her, but she violently shoved him away and rushed to the boat, barely able to contain the tears in her own eyes. She was startled when Gobber handed the children to her.

The old blacksmith trudged over to Hiccup and stiffly knelt beside him. "Hiccup," he said helplessly, "I don't know.... I almost-- I almost would...rather not go home."

Hiccup gazed up at him, his grief a raw wound, tears sliding down his face.

"This dragon thing...just come back to yourself, Hiccup, cast off this madness. Just say the word, and I'll-- You won't have to face this alone."

"...Dragons," Hiccup gasped out, "have been kinder to me than any...any human...I ever knew."

Gobber looked crushed, and near tears himself. He embraced Hiccup, then climbed heavily to his feet and made his slow way to the boat, shoulders slumped as if all hope had deserted him. Phlegma pushed off and they began to row away, leaving Hiccup broken and alone.

He was in almost too much pain to cry. He gasped for breath, unseeing, clutching at his chest as if his heart had stopped. He trembled and could not have stood up even if he'd tried. 'They're gone...they're gone...I've lost them forever....' He was supposed to wait for the Outcasts to come upon him and decide whether or not to accept him into their illegitimate tribe, or else attempt to survive on his own, but he had no interest in either option. He wanted to walk into the sea and keep walking until he disappeared forever in its depths. He would have done so if he'd had the strength to stand.

After a while, a heavy body thumped to the ground beside him. A voice squawked in concern, then a set of sharp fangs started to gently preen him. After a while, Hiccup struggled to his hands and knees, creeping closer and burying his face against the four-winged dragon's warm scales. "Take me home, Cloudjumper," he whispered.

To be continued....

Author's Notes: I believe it was my friend Anna who suggested to me that the captive dragons would probably be killed every year as food grew the most scarce, then a new batch of dragons would be captured after winter so the warriors could keep training. That idea made a lot of sense to me.
I feel like from Stoick's perspective, the "betrayal" must have seemed to him like his son had fallen in with Nazis. Weeks ago, while trying to kill a roach that was crawling around near the ceiling near my freaking bed, feeling my body get all hot and tense and shuddery with revulsion and anger and frustration and phobia-fear, it occurred to me to compare HTTYD dragons to cockroaches. What would it be like if someone I love had befriended a freaking cockroach? What would it be like to find out that cockroaches have feelings, and like to cuddle, and can be fiercely protective of their humans and all that? It just...I felt very strongly in that moment that Stoick is an amazing, amazing person....
Chapter 21

Carried Off, a DreamWorks' How to Train Your Dragon fanfic by Raberba girl

Chapter 21 (rough draft)

The flight passed in a blur. Hiccup might have dozed off a bit on the Stormcutter's broad back, and though his body shivered as they traveled farther north, he couldn't actually feel the cold.

He had a distant sense of relief, even of homecoming, when he saw the great icy spikes of the dragon nest. When Cloudjumper came to a landing and set him gently on the ground, Hiccup submitted quite willingly to being greeted and fussed over by a swarm of delighted dragons.

As soon as Hiccup laid eyes on the king, he mentally flung himself at the great dragon and poured out his heart, weeping uncontrollably as he offered up "Hurts hurts hurts hurts Hurts babies my precious Finn Val sweet small mine babies babies LOST LOST LOST pain, ripping a hole in my chest tearing out my heart squeezing all the blood out of it flinging it mangled to the ground, I want to die, I hurt too much to die, hurts SO MUCH, mine my babies my Finn Val that I love so so so so so much, lost lost LOST help me crush me please help me crush me hurts so much lost forever empty pain kill me...!"

The king thought helplessly that there could be no monsters darker or more cruel than humans. He wondered if his tiny, even more broken lost flockling was even human at all, if the poor creature was somehow a person that had inexplicably been born in a monster's body.

A small black dragon came tearing through the crowd, screeching in worry and excitement. Hiccup didn't even bother to look up - he held out his arms and braced himself just before Toothless crashed into him, covering him with dragon kisses and whining and pawing at him and marking him and loving him.

"I'm yours," Hiccup whispered. "All yours now. No human will ever own me again." When he had the strength, he climbed onto the Night Fury's back, and for a few hours he left his grief behind in the racing wind and stormy skies.

o.o.o.o.o

Flying was the only thing that really helped for a while. Otherwise, Hiccup could feel the grief as if
it was an invisible extra companion, draped heavily over his shoulders and firmly gripping his mind.

During that first week, he could think of nothing but his lost children, and even after that, they were never far from his thoughts. He would wake up sobbing from nightmares, or would lie awake in the dark being slowly overwhelmed by his feelings until they came bursting out of him as screams. He couldn't lie still, he would wander out of the cave, crying out over and over again in agony, startling the nocturnal dragons and awakening the diurnal ones. If no one immediately snatched him up to fly him out of his misery, he would wander the nest wailing, sometimes tearing at his own flesh, until someone did.

He ate whatever the dragons offered him without tasting it; he flew so often that he actually wore Toothless out. He often found himself on random peaks and islands, curled for comfort into a wheezing, sprawled, exhausted Night Fury.

Toothless started trading off with Cloudjumper, flying Hiccup as if they were parents taking turns soothing a colicky infant. Sometimes they would set their human on the king's head, and Hiccup would lie there dully sharing his grief with the leviathan. The great dragon was able to soothe his human flockling with a powerful, steady love as he moved about his nest on dragon business.

It was the king who roared out orders the second time Hiccup went tumbling off a ledge and nearly broke his neck. From then on, every dragon in the nest was on the alert to rescue Hiccup from his many halfhearted suicide attempts. He never consciously planned to kill himself, but whenever he accidentally fell off a dragon's back, or realized that the plant he was about to eat was poisonous, or that he had no particular reason to watch his step around deep pools of icy water....

"Get them back," the king suggested, once Hiccup recovered enough to tell him a more coherent version of his story. "You sneak to that not-yours human nest, take your precious things your babies 'Finn Val twins,' bring them here, home safe good."

Hiccup longed for such a thing with all his heart. But his imagination, unbidden, kept coming up with horrifying scenarios...being caught and killed, Toothless being caught and killed, any Sanctuary dragons who came with him being caught and killed, the twins getting caught in the crossfire and killed.... "You come with me?" he asked hopefully.

"No," the king said sadly. There was a brief, confusing impression of danger that overwhelmed Hiccup, but then the king was quiet and thoughtful. "...Repel those monsters." There was a flash of human-darkness and leviathan-darkness that Hiccup couldn't make sense of and which left a bitter aftertaste of horror in his mind. "Flock is safe. Safe flock, I will go with you. But danger still lurking? No; must PROTECT my flock."
Hiccup closed his eyes in despair. Even if he somehow miraculously managed to get his children to the Sanctuary without the king’s help and without any of his allies getting hurt, Astrid would inevitably track down her stolen heir, leading a horde of Viking warriors to the Sanctuary. They would be easily defeated, but how many dragons might be hurt in the process? Even if the king himself successfully fought off the invaders without a single dragon casualty....

Even after everything, Hiccup could not bring himself to do something that would result in wiping out almost an entire generation of people he had known all his life. Blood and death waited at the end of every path. Finn and Valka had more chances of surviving life in war-torn Berk than they did of making it safely to the Sanctuary. Hiccup might as well just start thinking of them as already being dead, because one way or another, he would never see them again alive.

"Lost," he thought dully. "I am dead torn worthless. Everyone else is safe. Good. Good thing; no hurting, only for me. Only me. It's good. Safe. Protect."

The mighty dragon king was not at all accustomed to feeling awe for other creatures, but he came close to it now. Despite all the ugliness it was cloaked in, he had not fathomed that such selflessness could exist in a mortal creature, much less one that thought of itself as human. "I love you so much. I love you so very much."

It was too much for Hiccup, who wept and begged to escape and hide. The king let him, bewildered and troubled as always by this sort of thing. Such purity, and yet such filth in the same heart; great light and great darkness striving against each other in the same vessel. He felt anger at those who had wounded his little flockling so deeply, yet also curiosity and that foreign sense of awe again, wondering what this creature named 'Broken' in the dragon nest and 'Hiccup' in his own strange language would have been like if he’d been allowed to grow up whole and nurtured and unthreatened.

'He would have the heart of a king and the soul of a dragon.' The alpha pondered this for a while, the idea of one of his tiny flocklings actually being a fellow sea-king. 'This is what he has now, hidden under the grief and darkness. Someday he will heal and smile at the light and find his heart and soul again.' He watched Hiccup sitting in front of Toothless, gamely trying to imitate the Night Fury’s noises. 'My precious flockling that I love.'

The other thing that soon started to help as well were hatchlings. Hiccup adored them, petting and playing with and crooning at and feeding any who happened to wander into his path. Perhaps this was why he soon found himself baby-sitting rather often. Dragons would walk up to him, give him a cheerful greeting, growl sternly at their offspring, then walk or fly away, and the hatchlings would eagerly swarm around Hiccup until, usually a few hours later, they would be collected again by their
"Soooo, what, is this my job now? Am I officially hired?" he teased a dragon, who cocked her head in confusion at him. "Are you going to pay me in vomit-fish or something? Sorry, but that currency is not acceptable~ What else've you got to trade?"

Despite the teasing, Hiccup loved it. Caring for babies, any babies, helped ease the pain he felt at no longer being able to care for his own. Toothless had a low tolerance for the little ones' antics, but Hiccup was endlessly patient with them and Cloudjumper seemed to enjoy the work as well, serving as Hiccup's partner and translator. (Though lacking the king's mind-reading abilities, the Stormcutter still seemed to understand humans better than any other dragon in the nest.)

Even outside his new 'job,' Hiccup started often waking up to find hatchlings snuggled into him. He learned to identify the babies' families so that he could obligingly return all the wayward children who sought him out. "Delivery for Cloverfoot! I believe these belong to you, ma'am: one male hatchling with three spots and one female hatchling with previously chipped horn, delivered promptly and in good condition. No need to thank me, ma'am! I'm just glad to be of service~"

One female hatchling in particular seemed to adopt Hiccup. She hovered over him in a motherly way, comforting him whenever he thought too strongly of what he had lost and scolding any of the other young dragons who were too rough with Hiccup or tried to steal from him. He named her Hen and accidentally taught her how to cluck like her namesake.

One evening, Hiccup noticed a mother Scuttleclaw who lay in her nest, sprawled wearily across her eggs rather than sitting on them properly. Her scales were an unhealthy pale color, and there was mucus leaking from her nose and crusted around her eyes. "Ohhh, poor mama, what's wrong...?" Hiccup cleaned her up as gently as he could, did his best to feed her, and stayed with her all night, but when he woke up in the morning, he discovered that the sick dragon was no longer breathing. Her expression in death was peaceful.

The dragons mourned their lost flockmate, after which there was the matter of who ought to adopt her two orphaned eggs. The dragon's mate had died from an injury weeks earlier, and she was too new to the nest to have yet found a close enough companion who would have automatically taken charge of her offspring.

Hiccup, oblivious to the discussion, was the first one to bury the eggs in embers and ash to simulate a parent dragon's warmth. By the time he'd been caring for the eggs for three days, it had been agreed that, human though he was, he would be permitted to display his competency as a replacement mother. Toothless, jealous and with no natural fondness for babies, was displeased at the prospect of becoming a father to eggs he hadn't even sired, though Cloudjumper was delighted.
"You be their papa, not me," Toothless insisted.

Cloudjumper expressed exasperation with the younger dragon's immaturity. "Half's Child is their mama; you are his other half, I am his friend. He belongs to you more, so you are papa to his hatchlings, not me."

"I do not like babiiiiieesss, annoying loud take take take no give, I am JEALOUS! My human that I love! Not theirs; mine!"

"Ours," Cloudjumper said firmly. "Our human that we love, me and you and Alpha and many flockmates that love this broken gentle not-monster human!"

"ME MOST!!!!"

"You most. But still ours."

Toothless pouted and twined himself possessively around Hiccup. "Mine mine mine mine mine."

"Move, Toothless, I'm trying to roll this thing over. You're gonna make me burn my hands."

"Mine! Half Of Me loves me?!" Toothless insisted anxiously.

Hiccup grinned, then suddenly threw his arms around Toothless and squeezed. The Night Fury's eyes widened, but he had almost gotten used to the bizarre human gesture of affection by now. "You want some love, Mr. Jealous? You want some cuddles, huh~?"

"Mine," Toothless huffed, darting out his tongue to lick the back of Hiccup's head.

"No Teeth," the king mused during one of their learning-more-about-each-other's-species
conversations, "Toothless.' One Who Has No Teeth. This silly name is your name for your other half?"

"Discomfort."

"Your friend/brother," the king amended, not sure why Hiccup insisted on using a different 'word' for the same thing, but gamely humoring him.

"Toothless' is...." Hiccup had to think about it for a while before he could articulate it. "...Scary scary scary monster dragon hurt me kill me HURT ME. Scared. Dragon not hurting me, not hurting me, scared angry, call this thing, no teeth? 'Toothless.' Silly name. Silly name for scary monster... 'Toothless,' amusement feel better. ...Little bit not scary anymore."

"Ah." The king understood what he was saying, but it didn't feel true, at least not anymore. "Sound-name is 'Toothless,' BUT. 'Toothless' means 'no teeth,' BUT, does not mean that anymore - same sound, same, but means something different now. You say 'Toothless,' now means friend/brother. Not 'no teeth.'"

"Huh...huh. I guess you're right," Hiccup mused aloud.

"Same with Valka and Fourwing Cloudjumper. She says 'Cloudjumper,' always always 'Cloudjumper,' meant 'one who leaps over clouds' at first but not anymore, now means 'other half of me that I love.' Same sound, different meaning."

"Same for me, too," Hiccup realized. "Hiccup' means--" He imagined himself hiccupping, and winced at an overwhelming burst of amusement from the king.

"HICCUPS? 'Hiccup' means HAVE HICCUPS?? Very much silly name!"

"Yes. Strange name scare away monsters."

"Ha ha ha ha! I love not-monster humans, so strange and crazy and interesting. Have hiccups. More silly name than even 'no teeth.'"
"Yes."

The king turned thoughtful. "Same with Valka your mother. Always, always she thinks 'Hiccup,' but does not mean have hicccups. Means 'baby tiny small child that I love miss love worry fear love.'"

"What is your name?" Hiccup asked curiously.

The king had no idea how to answer this question, at least not the way his adorably strange little flockling was asking it. "I am **ALPHA**."

Hiccup winced again, touching a hand to his head.

"Your human word is 'king,' yes?"

"Yes.... But your name! You are born, your mother calls you something; what is it??"

The memory was so far away that the king had to think a long time before he could recall it. "Dam's name for me was Larger, because my clutchmate was smaller than me."

"?! You think my name is silly; yes but your name silly too! That can't be your name, you must have a much better name than 'Larger'!"

The king was glad that he had already been through this with Valka, otherwise he would have been very perplexed. "Different, Hiccup. I am dragon, you are human. You are 'Hiccup' ALWAYS. No dragon has a name ALWAYS, that is very strange. I am me. You are you. Your friend/brother is himself. That is enough. But you silly interesting humans can't smell, so you make these sound-names to call each other instead."

"You don't have permanent names?!!" Hiccup was astonished.

"It's different, Hiccup," the king said kindly. "Dragon names are good; human names are good. Different but still good."
"Yeah...?"

"Interesting, so very much INTERESTING, I love these not-monster humans...."

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One night, Hiccup was frightened awake by a loud bang. "What was that?! What happened?!" There was a weak cheeping sound in the darkness, and he got the impression of many dragons watching intently, though keeping their distance for some reason. Cloudjumper kept insistently poking him in the back.

Then Hiccup saw the fiery outline of eggshell cracks, realized what was happening from previous hatchings, and dove for cover. A few moments after the explosion, a second set of confused, hungry cheeps joined the first.

Hiccup crept out from behind Cloudjumper, his chest tight with excitement, accidentally crunching eggshell fragments as he moved. He gently took hold of the first newborn, a male, and tugged it into his lap; then he gathered up the female as well. He crooned at them, petting them, thinking that he should clean the birth slime off of them, but unwilling to leave them long enough to do so. He ended up pulling off his tunic and using that to sponge off the worst of the goo.

After several minutes of this, Toothless marched up, unceremoniously vomited up some fish, then plopped down at Hiccup's side in a distinctly pouting way. Both hatchlings tumbled out of Hiccup's lap and started eagerly eating the fish. "Thanks for that, buddy," Hiccup said, patting a somewhat mollified Toothless. "Good call." He took the opportunity to go fetch some cloths and a bucket of water.

Hiccup named the male hatchling Finn, and the female Valka. He knew he was never going to see the children of his flesh and blood again, so it helped to ease the still raw wound in his heart that he now had a new set of twins who were all his own.

Hours later, the hatchlings had been cleaned, fed some more, and caressed, as well as thoroughly scent-marked by their adoptive father and four-winged guardian (to make up for the deficiencies in their human mother's much vaguer scents. Hen, who had been enthusiastically doing a lot of the cleaning and playing, managed to slip in some marks of her own). The babies curled up against their mother's soft belly and quickly fell asleep.
"I love you, Finn," Hiccup murmured, shifting so he could encircle them with his arms. "I love you, Val." He smiled when Toothless lay down behind him, draped a foreleg over him, and curled his long tail around him. "You make a comfy pillow, Toothless, did you know that?" Hen bustled up to nuzzle the younger hatchlings one last time, then snuggled against Hiccup's hair. Hiccup gently pushed her paws out of his face and fell asleep safe within the boundaries of his icy home, watched over by his mother's four-winged companion, embraced by his own companion and his young dragon sister, with his children nestled in his arms. It was the first time in a long time that he felt at peace.

*To be continued....*

**Author's Notes**: Hen is one of those characters who came out of nowhere; I did not plan her at all. XD
Beloved, chapter 1

Carried Off: Beloved, a DreamWorks' How to Train Your Dragon fanfic by Raberba girl

Summary: Hiccup's abduction from Toothless's perspective.

A/N: In this AU, Wanderer, Rainbow Chaser, and Feather Snatcher all survive longer than they do in my other fics; also, Slyfoot is in the Red Death's flock, but he's still a hatchling too young to join the raids yet. (...I don't know who his parents are [yet?], but it's not important [yet?].)

Chapter 1 (rough draft)

BREEDMATES! I was the only only only nightwing for sooooo long, but now I finally found breedmates~!

There is an older male and a young female and a young male. They are with this(our?) big flock of fireskins and spinetails and rock-eaters and two-heads and venomfangs, and they are attacking a human nest. I don't know why they are stealing food from the humans, but humans are monsters and humans are hurting dragons and knocking them out of the sky, so I will help my-- I will help!

I fly and shoot like the female nightwing shows me, and then I see that the blades and other hurting things keep coming from that place. I will burn it, and hurting things will stop coming out of it.

Except when I shoot it I hear babies screaming, I rush to rescue them and then realize I did something very stupid because they're not hatchlings, they're cubs. Monster cubs.

They are very small and soft and helpless, they flail in their bed but can't move to run away. The male is scared sad scared sad scared; the female bats my nose with her paw and stops being scared. She likes my nose and tries to bat it again.

I move out of her reach and sniff at her sibling, who wants his parents very much. I lick him and he stops screeching.

Someone rushes in, monster human, roaring at me and brandishing a blade. I will fight him and kill
him, except when I get close I realize that he's not hating - the thing his body is screaming is "PROTECTION-TERROR/FURY!!!"

He is the sire of those two cubs. They are precious to him, he is defending them as fiercely as a mama bear would defend her bear cub. He will be very dangerous to fight if he is protecting precious things.

But now he's different, backing away from me. He's more afraid and desperate now, warbling at me with strange monster sounds, almost coaxing. His cubs are calling for him.

Ohhhh. I understand. He is a most devoted parent - he will lure predators to him and give his body to them so that they will forget about his cubs and they will live. He thinks I want to eat them. He can't be a monster; he is human but he can't be a monster, monsters can't love anyone as much as this brave human loves his babies.

He roars again and charges, but I don't know why he dropped his weapon. He is gathering his offspring into his forelegs, he will carry them away somewhere safe and hide them.

But he doesn't, he sees me and is frightened, he crouches down and shields his cubs beneath him. He has very much love but is not smart at all, I didn't make any threats! I don't want his cubs, but he is protecting them from me anyway.

I investigate this terrified not-monster human. He smells like distress and coal and metal. He mates often and is unhappy often. He smells too much like fire and metal, I think he is bad to make those hurting things. He smells like his cubs and they smell like him - they smell more like him than their dam, he touches them more often than she does. He is like my own sire who loved me very much even when he didn't need to take care of me anymore. I will give this human a name that reminds me of my companion/sire. His flesh feels so nice under my tongue, smooth and soft and rich with scents.

The cubs are upset, the female doesn't like being pinned in the dark and the male wants to be comforted. I want to investigate them, too, but when I try, the human I named Loves-his-children roars at me and shoves me away. Why is he so stupid?! I will not hurt your cubs, you silly human, I just want to talk to them!! I try to tell him this, but he is frightened and hides his face from me.

Somebody is roaring, a female monster this time. She and Father-love bellow at each other as if they're talking, Father-love is relieved and worried, the female that I smell is his mate is ANGRY ANGRY ANGRY like a normal monster. She is not a person, so I can kill her; those cubs have their sire who loves them and will take care of them, they don't need their dam.
But maybe Father-love loves his mate, too, because he charges me so that I miss when I try to shoot. He saves his mate from being killed by me.

This human is good to have so much love, he shouldn't be here in a nest with monsters. They are making him bad, maybe it's their fault he makes hurting things to hurt and kill dragons. I will take him away to my good wonderful-- ??? I will take him away. If(we/Him??) will teach him to be good and love people that deserve to be loved. Maybe we will teach him to be smarter and not be afraid when there's no threat.

I should take his precious things, too, but I can't carry three things all together. I know what I'll do, I'll take Father-love away with me, and when we teach him to be good, then he can come back and rescue his cubs from this monster nest, too. Their dam will take care of them while they wait for him.

I seize my interesting human in my claws. He shrieks and struggles because he is very stupid, but after a while he goes limp and just whimpers quietly. Stop being so scared, Stupid, I won't hurt you!!

Except after a long time I think maybe I am hurting him, I don't know how. I'm worried, he's making crying sounds and I can tell his body is distressed, there's something wrong. I have to land and tend to him.

He is still frightened of me when I examine him, but he doesn't fight me or flee. His skin is so soft and fragile but not bleeding. His limbs...there's something a little bit wrong with them, I don't know what, little breakings under the skin that--

Oh. He is so raw with no scales to protect him, only these flimsy useless dead coverings that are even softer than his skin. I just hurt him by carrying him all this way, poor little stupid weak thing! I will feed him so he will be stronger.

I have to go fishing, it's hard to find fish but I do, and I am proud of myself when I bring it back to him but he won't eat it. Even when I make him take a bite, he is disgusted and annoyed and still a little afraid, and he won't eat even though he needs to. He is the most stupid creature I ever met, maybe I was wrong to rescue him. I will bring him to-- (Him??) Hmmm. I am confused...I will bring him to...I have to take him-- I have to get away...I will fly, we will fly, fly, fly, I want to go back there but I want to go there, too....
I am flying. Why am I carrying a human?? I was-- I was--

What?!

Breedmates, yes, but...I was not their flockmate! Why did I think I was their flockmate??! I was...fighting...alongside them...fighting monsters--

I am carrying a monster.

I was fighting monster humans, helping my breedmates-who-are-not-flockmates, I found human cubs and I found their sire and I am bringing him to my alpha so he won't be a monster anymore, but....

What happened to me???

SKY-KING.

There is a *sky-king* back there in that territory, she tried to STEAL ME.

HOW DARE SHE TRY TO STEAL ME. I BELONG TO MY GOOD SEA-KING ALPHA WITH MY GOOD FLOCK IN OUR GOOD NEST IN OUR GOOD TERRITORY, *I DO NOT BELONG TO ROTTEN SCARY SNEAKY FLOCKLING-STEALING SKY-KINGS!!!*

I still have this human, oops.... I stole him. He's a monster so I was not bad to steal him, but he would still be with his little babies if I hadn't stolen him, so I don't think I should drop him down into the ocean so that he dies.... I must still take him to Alpha. Alpha will know what to do.

My flockmates greet me and are very interested in the human I have brought to our home.

"*He will be another Clever Paws for us?*"
"I miss her...."

"Oooohhh, he is her offspring."

"So?"

"Alpha said that parents and offspring are VERY SO MUCH IMPORTANT for humans. If Clever Paws was still here, she would be very much glad to see her cub."

"He's not a cub, he's an adult."

"He has his own cubs now," I say. "If he stays here and stops being scared and stupid, I will bring his cubs here, too."

My human is not just scared, he is so terrified and frantic that I keep thinking he will flee and hide, but he keeps just playing dead. Does he still think we will eat him???

"What's wrong with your human, Nightwing?"

"He is very stupid and thinks he is prey."

My human leaps up and dashes, I think he will hide but no, he's roaring at us and brandishing a stick at us. He is so scared I think I have to make that his new name.

"Stop that, silly." I take him to Alpha. My human sees Alpha and is so horrified and scared that he's not even scared anymore, just heart-sick.

Alpha looks at us. "Clever Paws Valka's child."

Maybe parents and grown-up offspring really are important for humans. I wonder why. "I rescued him from monsters, but something's wrong with him."
Alpha tries to talk to Scared in that strange human way we not-alphas-or-humans can't understand, but Scared is too scared to respond.

"Alpha, what do I do with him???

"He is too frightened now. Hide him and let him rest, comfort him. When he feels safe, he will tell me."

"Clever Paws wasn't as frightened as this one is."

"Clever Paws wasn't as hurt as this one is."

"I didn't hurt him!" Well, I didn't hurt him on purpose....

"You said monsters hurt him."

Oh. "But he's safe now!"

"He doesn't know that. He thinks we're monsters."

"WHAT?!"

"There is something very bad and wrong with that human nest, I don't know what...."

I carry Scared away even though he squawks at me and struggles. He thinks I'm a monster! That's wrong! I wish he could talk so that I could tell him he's wrong wrong wrong, that he's safe now and I will take care of him and protect him from real monsters.

He is scared of flying and he's scared of me and he's scared of the nest and he's scared of Alpha and he's scared of darkness and he's scared of being alone, he's scared of everything. I think maybe he will calm down when he's somewhere dark and quiet with no one to investigate him and bother him, but he doesn't, he's just scared scared always scared.
"I won't hurt you," I say as I approach, but he tries to flee as if I said 'I will kill you' instead. He curls up and covers his soft weak head with his soft weak forelegs as if that could protect him. How do humans hurt and kill so many of us when they're so soft and small and weak???

I lie down with my human to comfort him, even though of course he's scared of being comforted, too.

But after a long time he finally finally finally is only a little scared instead of a lot scared. He shifts and looks into my eyes. I don't like it, it feels threatening, but somehow I know that he doesn't know he's threatening me.

He makes soft question-sounds, but I don't know what he's asking because he can't talk.

"I don't know what you want. Come here and be comforted, silly." I pull him back and lick him. He makes grieving sounds and then water starts leaking from his eyes, just like Clever Paws did whenever she was Very Sad. "I know you're Very Sad, that's why I'm comforting you! I wish you were not so stupid, you poor little human."

He starts to relax a little, but it's giving-up relaxing, not happy relaxing. He still doesn't feel safe, even though no enemy at all could get past the flock guardians and sneak past our good sea-king alpha and defeat me to hurt him. What is wrong with him that he thinks monsters can still reach him even though he's safe safe safe?!

After a long time, he gets up and says "I will defend myself from you" with his paws even though he can't protect himself with paws that are so tiny and soft. He chitters nervously at me and moves to go outside, I don't know why he wants to go outside when he's scared.

Yes, he is more scared again when he looks outside. He moans and curls up in the dark again. He thinks we are monsters. Poor human thinks he is in a nest full full full of monsters who will hate him and hurt him; no wonder he's so scared. I wish he could talk so he could understand when I tell him that we're people and we have love and he is safe.

To be continued....

Author's Notes: "Clever paws" is the dragon phrase for human hands that comes from
Le'etha's fanfic *Nightfall*.

I honestly don't know what was going through Cloudjumper's head in canon. He *knew* that Valka had a baby, yet he still took her away from Hiccup anyway?! I have a really hard time trying to understand his motivations in that scene, but I did my best here in this alternate version with Toothless.
My human is finally being a little bit brave. He creeps into the light and he is frightened of my flockmates but doesn't flee or attack them. He makes his nervous chittering as they greet him and mark him and investigate him, and he pats them with his little paws.

I'm surprised that he goes to pay obeisance to Alpha all on his own, I didn't have to make him. It's a strange human kind of obeisance, just folding his body and not calling out or making any scent-marks, but of course Alpha is not offended. Alpha loves not-monster humans, He thinks they are very so much interesting. He asks if Scared will let Him talk to him now.

Scared is OF COURSE so scared, but I guess he was brave and said yes anyway, because finally Alpha starts saying things in His Alpha-to-human way that I don't understand. All I know is that Scared is scared and confused and shocked and scared. And then tired.

"Take him back to your aerie to rest," Alpha tells me. "Poor little one, he is worn out. The same thing happened with his 'mother' when we learned to talk to each other...."

When Scared wakes up again, he is OF COURSE frightened. I'm glad he still doesn't flee or fight, even though his body very much wants to.

"Don't be scared, you're safe safe safe."

He squawks at me, he is annoyed and unhappy but I don't know why. Then he makes a gurgling noise, but he didn't make it with his mouth like usual, he made it with his stomach. He doesn't like my teeth so close to his soft belly, and that scared I understand, but he doesn't even try to protect himself. It's strange that he's so scared and brave at the same time.

His stomach is too empty, of course he's hungry. I must feed him, so I do as if he's a hatchling that can't catch his own food, but he is very much stupid and doesn't want food even though he's so hungry.
"EAT."

He is frightened and cornered, I don't like that he makes me feel like I'm hunting him even though all I want to do is take care of him.

He crouches down low. Is he submitting to me?? "Here," he says.

Why 'here'?? There's nothing there.

He makes a noise that I don't understand, waving his paws in front of his mouth. He makes the noise again and again, it sounds a little bit like my fire when I shoot.

My fire comes out of my mouth when I shoot. He is waving his forepaws by his mouth like flickering fire, he makes the fire noise and said 'Here'....

I shoot a blast at his 'Here' place. He's shocked and scared, but then...relieved. Yes. He did want to me shoot at 'here.'

He puts the fish on the hot stone and bares his teeth even though he feels a tiny bit happy. We crouch there for a while, then he tells me to "Shoot here" again in his strange human way.

When the fish is crispy, he FINALLY FINALLY eats it. I understand now! Stupid human, if he just told me he likes his food cooked, I would cook it for him...!

Something is wrong. I don't know what happened, but my human is upset again, he's not really scared anymore but he's grieving and his heart is hurting. I try to comfort him--

"STOP THAT!" he roars at me. Why is he angry at me?! I was comforting him!

He leaps up and roars and growls and attacks me. What?!! Why?! What is wrong with him?!

He can't hurt me with his silly weak limbs and soft paws and useless teeth, but I don't like him flailing at me, so I make him stop. "Stop that," snarl, ordering him to submit because he did
something strange and wrong.

He refuses to submit to me! He is pinned down and weak and helpless, but he still will not submit! What is wrong with him?!

He struggles and screeches, maybe he's crazy. I shake him and pin him again. "I am bigger than you stronger than you, I dominate you and subdue you! You are smaller than me and weaker than me, you must submit!" Why does he not understand such an obvious thing??

Still he struggles. My jaws are not enough, I pin him with my paw, too, but he already couldn't escape; he doesn't care that he can't escape even more. I think...I think maybe he is saying, "I would rather die than submit to you!!" It scares me. This creature wants something more than it wants to live. It's crazy, I brought a broken crazy thing to my nest?!

But Alpha didn't tell me to throw this thing away.... Alpha knows this thing is crazy, but He still likes him. It's okay. There is something very wrong with Scary Crazy Thing, but he won't hurt us, that's why Alpha let him stay.

I'm shocked and scared because I think maybe Crazy will win...he's so small and weak, but he will win anyway, I don't don't don't know how...!

But then I feel him go limp. He almost won, but he didn't, I won, it's a good thing but I feel bad. Something's wrong. Maybe...I did the wrong thing...?

Crazy is hurt. Oh no, oh no, I...I shouldn't have won, I forgot how fragile he is and I hurt him, he was so scary and strong that I forgot to be gentle, I couldn't be gentle or I would lose, maybe I should have let him win, but I didn't, I forced him to submit and now he's hurt, I think I am wrong and bad....

My teeth are not sharp, I didn't break his soft skin, which maybe is good but I can't tend to him. I can clean away blood and soothe cuts, but when the breakings are under his skin where I can't reach, I...I hurt him and I can't even help him. I'm bad.

I take my human back to Alpha, Alpha can do many things that we little flocklings can't. "Alpha!"

"What is it?"
"My human, my little soft human, I am bad and wrong, I hurt him.... Look. I hurt him where I can't reach; I can't tend to him. I'm bad and wrong."

"You must be gentle with not-monster humans," he scolds me. He is displeased, I am very much ashamed.

"Yes yes yes yes yes."

Alpha tries to talk to Hurting, but my human startles us both when he shrieks, frightened and angry.

"He won't talk to me?!"

"Alpha, I think he is crazy."

"Yes, but he won't talk to me...." Alpha is sad.

Hurting is curled up on the ground, hurting and grieving and upset and very much distressed. My flockmates are coming to investigate him and comfort him, but he says "I do not trust you, I protect myself from you, I'm so unhappy!!"

Alpha orders everyone to leave him alone, no one can help Hurting if he doesn't want to be helped. He lets me close to him without being afraid, but he won't let himself be comforted by me even though I try. I lick the bruises I made on him because I want so much to soothe him even though I know I can't. This human is too strange, I don't know how to take care of him.

Fourwing is here, he came because he loved Clever Paws his human other half, and he wants to love this new not-monster human, too. "I want to be close to her child that she loved, but he is afraid and hiding.... I will wait."

"Fourwing," I ask, "do you know how to take care of scared crazy hurting grieving upset humans?"

"?! What did you do to Half's Child?!"
I want to say that I didn't do anything bad to him! But I did, I'm bad and wrong and hurt him, so I don't answer. "He is sad and scared. How do I comfort him?"

"He's hiding. Be patient until he stops hiding, then he will let you love him."

He knows because he had a human of his own. I will do what he did, I will be patient and wait.

Hurting mutters, then suddenly he uncurls and stares. He is shocked and scared of Fourwing, I don't know why! Why is he so scared, even of things that don't threaten him and don't hurt him and want to love him?!

Fourwing approaches softly, crooning reassurances, but Scared hides under my wing. He's so scared of Fourwing that he will hide with me even though he's scared of me. "Maybe we should find something that scares him more than you, Fourwing, and then he will go close to you."

"No, Nightwing! That's mean and bad."

"I know! I was just wondering...."

I'm surprised and relieved when Scared creeps out again and looks up at Fourwing, like he is challenging him but thinks he will lose. Maybe I really should name him Crazy, to want a fight he knows he'll lose. He cringes back when Fourwing leans down to mark him, but he doesn't fight. Fourwing claims my human as "child of my other half" and "thing that this fourwing protects." Me and him together will keep our scared crazy little human safe.

Scared/Crazy gets a little braver later, he goes to explore our nest. He is relieved when we shoo away dragons who want to investigate him, but he doesn't like it when it's time to eat and I pick him up. He squawks and struggles, but he's more annoyed now than scared. I like that he's annoyed more than when he's scared.

We grab our food, we claimed enough for both of us and for our human, but he only takes two fish to eat. I know now that he likes to eat his food cooked, so I cook it for him and he's pleased.

I think he's pleased. He says "I threaten you," but he seems happy instead.
"Half Of Me did that, too," Fourwing explains. "For humans, it's not a threat; for humans, it means I'm happy."

Oh. Well, I should tell my human that I'm happy he's not cowering and that he's not so crazy that he won't eat. I can't bare my teeth at him, that would be bad, but maybe I can bare my harmless gums. "I am happy," I tell him in his crazy human way.

He doesn't agree with me, he's just shocked. Humans are very confusing! I give up and eat my good fish.

When it's time to go home, my human runs from me. I'm annoyed and frustrated, but then I stop and watch him because I don't think he's fleeing even though he's running. He's not scared, he's...annoyed and frustrated, just like I am. Is he trying to tell me something???

"NO, okay? I don't want to do the hauled-around-like-a-helpless-captive thing anymore. No."

He's barking and gesturing so firmly and sharply. I think he says, "I do not want to be carried by you!!"

Okay. Okay, BUT! But you have no wings, you silly little human, how will you get home if I don't carry you??!

We challenge each other for a long time, standing very still glaring at each other. Then he cautiously starts to approach me, but he doesn't like it when I move to keep him in sight.

"No! Stop that, stay put!"

He's gesturing hard at the ground. Is he saying "This place here"?? What about that spot? There's nothing there!

I sniff it anyway, maybe he knows something about it that I missed, but I feel a touch and I leap away. What? He was trying to attack my back when I wasn't paying attention, what?!
"Argh, dragon!" He is so frustrated. He sighs and looks at me. He's looking right into my eyes, but I...don't think he's challenging me. He's just frustrated. "...Look, Toothless. You don't mind if I call you Toothless, right? Too bad, I'm gonna call you that anyway."

CHITTER CHITTER MEANINGLESS CHITTER. I WISH HUMANS COULD TALK FOR REAL.

"There is this other arrangement, and it's where I don't get dangled from my poor abused arms. It's where I, you know, sit on your back, and you can carry me and it won't hurt. That sounds a lot better, right? No? Well, remember, you owe me. You kidnapped me, so I'm going to start making some demands here, evening out the score a bit, you jerk."

I growl. I am very frustrated.

He GROWLS BACK. "Yeah, see, I can growl, too."

I'm about to pounce on him and subdue him, but then I remember that that is not a good thing to do to my fragile strange crazy human. I don't know what to do! I want to ask Fourwing, but he's watching like a mama watching her fledgling hunt, and I know he won't help me because he wants me to learn how to take care of a human all by myself.

My human approaches again, paws stretched out to me, his chittering softer and more coaxing. "I'm not gonna hurt you, okay? I know it probably makes you uneasy to have me up there where you can't see me, but I promise I won't hurt you. I wouldn't, even if I could. Which I can't, because I'm a pathetic weakling. Okay?"

He doesn't like when I edge away from him, but he doesn't sound angry anymore. He makes the "this spot" gesture again. "Stay, Toothless. Stay. Stay."

This spot. Nothing in that spot, but he doesn't like when I move....

"Stay in the spot where you already are." That's what he's saying. Yes, he is relieved when he touches my back, and he even nuzzles me a little. "That's right. See? Very good. Stay, Toothless. Good job."

I feel pressure, he's moving, his body is light but I am very aware of him on my back. I can't see
him. I don't like it, but I can smell him, he's not angry or frustrated anymore, he's relieved and a little affectionate, he's crooning and caressing me with his soft paws.

...I will carry my human home on my back???

"Half Of Me did this, too," Fourwing finally says. "Humans don't like being carried, they want to ride. They are not babies. They like to be where our wings are, to pretend they have wings of their own. They are creatures of the earth, but they still long for the sky just like we do."

Oh. Ohhhhhh, I understand now. I crane my head to try to lick my human, I can only reach his knee, I understand now.

"Heh. Okay. Now we can go, Toothless."

Flying is different with him on my back instead of in my claws. Better. It's easier to fly, less drag; I'm more aware of him, of how he feels and what he needs. He is terrified but exhilarated all at once--

...He has no wings, he has been flightless his whole life. This glorious thing that we need to live...my poor human has never had it. But now he does. Now he's...living, here in the sky with me, and I know he belongs up here just like I do.

It's good to be together with my flock, but they're all too slow! I am a nightwing, I am a very good and fast amazing dragon, I want to fly.

What--?! Fourwing is up here, too! He is challenging me! Playful, but he says fourwings are better than nightwings and I will lose!

I WILL NOT loose.

I FLY, I race, I will beat that fourwing in a challenge, I will--

What happened?? Something happened, I was flying and then something changed, bad--
My human! He has fallen off my back, he's not catching himself-- He can't catch himself, he has no wings, he will fall and die; no!!!

I catch him. I catch him, RELIEVED worried relieved, he is okay, yes??

He is okay. I think. Maybe. He is like...happy and crazy and excited and grieving all at the same time, I don't understand it. He's making a strange noise and won't stop.

He doesn't like being carried like this, but I can't get him on my back, so I put him on Fourwing's back instead. Fourwing is worried about him, too - why won't he stop that strange happy/wild/crazy/sad sound??

Finally he does stop, he's so tired and sad and happy at the same time. There really is something wrong with my human, I'm worried about him.... He's too weak to go back to our aerie with me, so I carry him there and comfort him like a hatchling until he falls asleep.

To be continued....
Beloved, chapter 3

Carried Off: Beloved, a DreamWorks' How to Train Your Dragon fanfic by Raberba girl

Chapter 3 (rough draft)

I have a bad dream, and I'm glad when I wake up and my human is still snuggled close to me and not a monster. It was just a dream. There is something wrong with my human, but not like that. I don't have to be afraid of him, I can still keep him.

My human is not very scared today, good. He wanders and chirps and is curious. He says with his urine that he is very stressed and he's not eating all the things he needs to eat, but I don't know what I'm supposed to feed him that's not fish.... Maybe plants? But there are so many plants here and he's not eating them, he would eat them if those were the things he needs, right??

Red-eye says that she is healthy and will lay her eggs very soon. Three Claws says that he very much wants to mate. There is a big clump of hatchling dung here where it's supposed to be, Jumprush finally trained her whole brood to put all their waste in a waste spot. Doublethink ate a too-rotten carcass and got sick; his friend Weave, when she finds out, rushes away to find him and tend to him.

"O-kay. Not sure what that was all about, but whatever...."

My human approaches a pool of water, inspects it, then starts shedding some of his coverings. His coverings are dark, brown and green, made from very dead parts of other creatures and plants, but his flesh beneath is pale like his face and forepaws, and it's alive and all him. It makes me feel better.... Humans cover up their real selves with parts of other people and things, and try to make those foreign things parts of themselves, it's confusing.

My human doesn't like water, he shivers and is unhappy, so I don't know why he keeps putting water on his flesh and head-fur even though he doesn't like it. I don't like it either, he's harder to smell now, he's especially grooming the places on himself where our marks are and weakening them. I'm glad when he puts his coverings back on with their him-smells and comes to cuddle with me to replenish our "This human belongs to this dragon" scents.

My human goes to Alpha. He gestures at Him in a strange human way I don't understand, and chirps at Him.

Yes, my human is with us in our flock now, that is very good.

Alpha and my human talk to each other in their special only-them way that I can't understand. My human is mostly distressed; Alpha is mostly confused/affectionate.

"What are you talking about?" I want to know.

"You must be very careful and gentle with your human, Nightwing."

"I know that!"

"Something is strange. He is very hurt and frightened, I don't know why. Be careful, Nightwing."

"Yes, I will!"

My human is very upset, I don't know why! He climbs onto my back and clings and chitters desperately.

"Take him somewhere safe to hide, Nightwing," Alpha says.

"But there is nothing to hide from! This whole good nest is safe, no one will hurt him here in our home!"

"Hide him."

"Okay...."
My human is not Scared anymore, but...maybe he is timid?? His posture always says "Expecting to be pounced on," but it's more than that, too. He's so sad. He's sad when he's still and quiet, but sometimes he's also sad even when he bares his teeth in that human smile of his. Even when he reaches out to hatchlings and plays with them, he has affection and joy but there's grief all mixed up in it, too.

"Friend," I say, because Fourwing is close to us so often and loves my human, so we're friends now, "what is wrong with my human??"

"He is like our flockmates that Half Of Me used to set free from monsters. Scared and hurt even when they are safe, maimed and scarred...."

That's what it is. Monsters don't just hurt people when they trap them.... Somehow they follow people even after they escape, and they keep hurting them. I wish wish wish I could see and touch the monsters that are riding on my human and still hurting him, I wish I could tear them with my claws and teeth, but I can't. My human must fight them off himself, but I don't know how to teach him, I've never had to do it before.

My human is talking to Alpha. Maybe Alpha will teach him.

No, Alpha is hurting him!!! "What did You do to my human?! You hurt him!!"

"I don't know." Alpha is distressed. He didn't mean to hurt our human. "He wants his dam that he loves, but she is gone and he grieves for her...."

I don't understand it, but Friend told me one time that his other half grieved for her baby too, she grieved for my human who is all grown up now. But they still miss each other, maybe they were companions. My poor human, he lost his companion, no wonder he's grieving....

He wanders, he is clawing at himself and keening, he will fall off the edge and has no wings to catch him, my human must stay away from that bad ledge!! And he must stay away from those eggs he almost stepped on, and he must stay away from those two flockmates who are fighting too close to him, he's so much grieving that he doesn't even notice anything around him!!

I corner him so he can't keep moving around doing dangerous things. He crouches down still grieving and whimpering, like he is fighting something that I can't smell or see, he's fighting it but
he's losing.

I wish I could heal his wounds. I know they're not in his flesh, but I want them to be so I can reach them. I push him down and try to heal him, but it's not these stupid dead coverings that are hurt, these things are in the way. I pull hard until they move, until I can reach him my real human underneath, but there's no blood on his flesh.... He is hurting so much but it's not here, it's inside where I can't reach, even if I tore open his body I couldn't reach his pain to soothe it away. I hate this.

His soft paws caress me, and he croons to me. He's comforting me. I can't help him at all, but he comforts me even though he's the one who needs to be helped. I love him. I don't just like him, I love him, I wish I could take care of him but he's so hard to take care of and I don't know what to do.

"I'm sad," he says with his voice. "I'm pretending not to be, but I am. Why won't you take care of me?"

I brought this human to my very good safe nest, but it didn't help him. ...Maybe I should not have brought him here. ...Maybe I did the wrong thing.

o.o.o.o.o

Human is my companion now. He scares me sometimes because I so much don't understand him, but I love him, and he loves me even though the monsters still hurt him. It's frustrating and scary that he won't give himself to me, it makes me uneasy, but he shows me affection and trusts me and is close to me all the time. I can't tell if he wants to be my companion or not, it's very strange, but I want to be his and he doesn't reject me, so we are companions.

Sometimes he likes to walk and walk and walk. We are moving away from the nest, I wonder where we're going?? Why aren't we flying? Companion refuses to fly with me but he doesn't like walking either but he does it anyway, why? He is getting tired.

He's so tired and cold and hungry now, but he won't let me tend to him. He keeps walking and walking so boriiiing, he is so determined but I don't know why, and he needs to be tended to! I know he does! I know he's so tired and hungry and cold, why does he refuse?!

I love my companion but he is very stupid, he doesn't know how to take care of himself. He can't
talk so he won't tell me where he wants to go, so I bring his poor tired hungry cold self back home.

I can make his body feel better, but he's still sad and angry. Why is he angry?! What did I do wrong?!

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o.o.o.o.o
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I love flying SO SO SO SO SO SO MUCH.

Not boring ordinary flying, I like that. But *flying*, stretching my wings and racing the wind and chasing the sun, being the very much best dragon in this whole flock, this is a *very* wonderful thing that I do and I am a very good dragon because I am the best.

Half Of Me.

Yes.

Because I don't carry Him anymore, dangling from my claws like prey.

I don't struggle through the air with a scared stiff clumsy land bound human clinging to my back.

*Now He knows how to fly, too.*

When we fly, He is not frightened. He is not sad or angry or grieving or scared. He is *none of those.*

When we fly, His body and mine are together like one body, He can talk so much better when we fly than when we don't, He knows what to do and I know what to do and we are like one person. Two people on the ground, distressed frustrated me and grieving frustrated Him; but here in the sky, our hearts touch and we are *one.*
"Higher!" He urges me, and yes, that is what I wanted, too, we wanted the same thing at the same time. "Spiral." He knows to press close against me as we spin.

"Fall," I warn Him, and He clings, not scared-clinging but anticipation-clinging. This falling-for-fun is a trick He taught me that I love, we FALL FALL FALL we will diiiiie, but no! Falling FOR FUN. ON PURPOSE. Because falling when your body thinks you will die even though you know you won't is fun, I don't know why~~!

I snap my wings out to catch us and glide for a while to rest, feeling Half Of Me caress me and hearing His coughing human laughter.

"Up a little...."

"Down a little...."

"Weave...."

"Horizontal swoop...."

"Enough resting; climb!"

"Yes!"

Our bodies signal and respond to each other. His joy and mine are the same. Half of my heart was born into a strange human body instead of a good dragon body, but it's okay. We found each other anyway, and now finally we are together.

o.o.o.o.o

Flying~ Flying~

"Go that way."
Flying~ Fly--

ROTTEN SKY-KING'S TERRITORY.

I turn away before we enter, ew. I will not let her try to steal me again, that is wrong and bad!

"Go that way!"

No, Half Of Me! Poor thing, You are stupid and can barely understand anything people say to You, but it's okay, I understand, I will keep both of us safe. We cannot go there into that bad sky-king's territory, or she will try to steal us.

"Go go go that way, go that way."

*SIGH* No, Half Of Me. We cannot go that way. No.

o.o.o.o.o

Flying~ Flyi--

"Go that way."

No, Half Of Me! Why does He want to go into that bad queen's territory's so much??

"Go that way!"

"NO."

Half Of Me is surprised and hurt and angry that I snarled at Him. I'm frustrated.
"Go...go that way, Half Of Me. Pleeeaaaase?"

WE CANNOT GO THAT WAY, HALF OF ME. I WISH YOU COULD TALK FOR REAL.

0.0.0.0.0

"Go that w--"

NO.

He coaxes first and then when I ignore Him, He tries to force me even though of course He can't. I get annoyed and frustrated and turn around to go home.

He falls off my back. He didn't warn me He would, He just slides off and falls, and when I catch up to Him, He is glaring at me in that defiant way that I know means He did it on purpose. He is saying in His human way, "I will fall and let myself die and very so much hurt Your heart unless You do what I want."

THAT IS VERY BAD AND VERY VERY VERY SO MUCH SELFISH, HALF OF ME. WHY WOULD YOU SAY SOMETHING SO HORRIBLE LIKE THAT????

I catch Him, but when we get to the ground I don't let Him on my back again. I'm so angry that I punish Him, I haven't tried to subdue Him in a long time but He did something so bad and horrible that I have to make Him understand that He can't do horrible selfish things like that!!

He will not submit.

He refuses.

I have Him pinned down, He can't escape, but even though I'm strong and He's weak and I'm right and He's wrong, He won't submit. We are not two halves like this. He is trying to break us and make us enemies.
I want to cry, it hurts, I shouldn't have let a human become half of me, but I don't know what to do, please submit please submit please please please please please please please please....

Finally His body goes limp. He's not looking at me challenging me anymore. He's not fighting anymore, but He's unresponsive and He won't love me either and He let me win, He knows He lost but...somehow He's not really submitting even though He says He is. He is hiding His heart from me. He really is a monster, He's so cruel.

I made myself half of a monster, I'm the one who's stupid and bad and wrong, I want to cry and hide and grieve just like my human.... Look at us, we are horrible and bad together just like we were happy and flying together, we really are two halves but both of us are bad and it hurts so much....

To be continued....
My other half is sick. Not His body, because He's making His own body sick and won't let me help Him. It's His heart that is sick, my other half is rotting, I'm so scared and sad and I don't know what to do.

"Half Of Me! Get up and come with me!"

"No. Go away."

"...Half Of Me, You are so hungry, but it's okay; look, I have a tasty fish for You to eat."

"No."

I cook it and offer it again. I know He likes His fish cooked.

"I don't want it."

"Eat, Half Of Me!"

"LEAVE ME ALONE."

...fraction..."HALF OF ME, GET UP AND EAT. GET UP AND EAT, YOU MUST DO THIS."

He gazes up at me. He doesn't struggle or snarl or even get angry, but He is so defiant in His strange...
passive way. Even if someone tore Him up when He's like this, they wouldn't win - somehow in some very strange scary way, He would still win even if He's dead.

"...Please, Half Of Me. You're too strong, I can't force You, but please eat. Please. I don't threaten You now; I beg You."

"I reject you. I want to die."

My other half is rotting. He is killing His own body and He's killing my heart. I didn't know anything could hurt so very much.

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I didn't tell Alpha because I'm ashamed that I made myself half of a monster, but I have to tell Him now. He will know how bad I am, but it's okay, I deserve it. Half Of Me is dying, and only Alpha can help Him now.

"Alpha, I am very bad. My other half is a rotting monster, and He's killing both of us. I don't know what to do. He's too strong for me and He's hurting me too much, I don't know what to do."

Alpha is angry that two of His flocklings are hurting each other so deeply, He's ANGRY that two halves are hurting each other so much, He's angry that one of His flocklings is rotting and He didn't know until now. He talks to Half Of Me for a long time.

Waiting waiting waiting, anxious apprehensive, waiting, will I die? Can Alpha save us, or will we die? Waiting, waiting, anxious appre--

Alpha lets Half Of Me go. Half Of Me is so upset, curled up on the ground so helpless and grieving.

"HOW DARE YOU."

No no no no no no no no no no...!
"YOU DID THIS BAD THING TO MY FLOCKLING THAT I LOVE. YOU STOLE HIM. YOU STOLE HIM AWAY FROM HIS MOST PRECIOUS THINGS, WHY DID YOU DO THIS TERRIBLE THING??"

I am the bad worst most horrible dragon I want to hide very deep sleep forever don't look at me--!!

Half Of Me. His small body, His gentle paws.

He is shielding me from Alpha.

.....

I don't. Understand it. I don't understand. Half Of...Me...I hurt You so much, I made You sad and grieving and bad, I...I did this, I hurt You so much You almost killed us both trying to escape, but...You...come back and...help me? Together with...me....

We are two halves again. We are one person here trembling and grieving and ashamed together, punished by our alpha for all the terrible bad things we did wrong, but we are...together....

Alpha is amazed. "So beautiful/ugly/beautiful...humans are so strange and horrible and wonderful, I don't understand...."

I'm so amazed that I'm a little scared, too. Half Of Me is so weak, but somehow at the same time He is so strong that He can shield me from a sea-king. My human is terrifying. No one can hurt me when I'm with Him. Everyone can hurt Him, I have to protect Him, but He protects me too even from things I didn't know I could be protected from....

Alpha makes Half Of Me eat. My human despairs, but He eats; His heart is so hurt but His body is a little better now.

"Tend to him," Alpha tells me. "When he is strong enough to fly again, you will take him back to his human nest and his children that he loves."

I am horrified. "Why do You tell me to do this?! He is my OTHER HALF! You tell me to throw
away my other half?!?!

"He is your other half. You will sacrifice yourself because you love him."

This is what two halves do, but, but, sacrifice myself to LOSE HIM?! No, why?! Why must I do this thing when I will lose Him instead of save Him?!

But...but I couldn't save Him here in my good nest, I couldn't help him, I...the only way I can help the person I love most is to send Him away from me...?

"Poor Nightwing," Alpha says, and His compassion comforts me a little. "This is a very big thing you did, to make yourself half of a human. So dangerous; you are very brave. They aren't like us."

"Half Of Me...Half Of Me...losing Him...."

"They can have more than one other half. They can give themselves to so many. They share themselves, they can very much love someone they don't even know, their love is strange and frightening and beautiful. This dangerous sweet thing you did, Nightwing."

"Half Of Me...."

"Our little human belongs to us, but he belongs to his precious things that he loves, too. He will reunite with them, he will heal. But he loves us, too - maybe he will love us so much there, so far away, just like he loved his precious things so much here, so far away. We must do this thing for him, but I don't think that bond will break. It will hurt us, so much pain, us and him and them. But it will not break. Human love is frightening and strange and amazing and so strong."

"Losing...my half of me that I love...."

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I know why the thing that I did was very bad. Half Of Me loved His precious things so much, just like I love Him so much. I never had a precious thing before, so I was stupid and didn't understand, but I have a precious thing now, so now I understand. If someone stole my other half away from me,
I would feel like my heart had been torn out. If I couldn't get back to my precious thing, I would want to lie down and die from grief.

*I did this to my other half.* This terrible hurting thing, *I did it to the person I love most.*

That's why He wanted to die. That's why He grieved and despaired and tried to escape and tried to die. That's why He defied me and fought me and hurt me. He was trying to get back to His precious things, His first ones before me, but I didn't let Him. I hurt Him *so much.*

That's why I'm bad, and that's why I deserve to be hurt now and lose Him.

I tend to my other half. He lets me now, even though He's grieving and heart-sick. His body is gaining strength, but finally finally finally He gave up, and even though I finally won, I hate it because He lost and now it's like His heart is dying. Maybe it was better when He was winning and fighting me and hurting me so much, because at least He was still trying to live.

Sometimes He still says "*I love You.*" The way He says it makes me feel like our love is poison to each other.

I was so wrong to steal Him. We should have become two halves by reaching out to each other, but we didn't. He didn't want to be taken away from His own nest and His precious things, but I stole Him. That's why we are so bad to each other, because I forced Him instead of offering to Him.

"Toothless, fly?"

'Toothless' is His special sound-name for me. 'Fly' means He wants to go flying with me. He is asking me so gently in His human way to please take Him away back to His human nest.

I'm so sad, I'm so sad, but I must do it. "*Alpha!*

"What is it?"

"*He's leaving us, He's leaving us, He's leaving us. I'm so sad.*"
"I am very sad, too."

Many flockmates come to tell Him goodbye, our little clever paws human flockmate that we all love and wanted so much to protect and help. "Ours," they mark Him, so that foreigners will know to be wary and not hurt Him, because He still belongs to our flock and many dragons from this nest will avenge Him if He is hurt. "Ours, ours, ours...!"

We are flying. I am throwing my other half my most precious thing away. I am so sad.

"Up." He asks me, but I'm too sad to play. My heart hurts, how can I play and be joyful when I'm losing my other half??

Flying. Flying. I feel it now, the border of her territory, that sky-king queen who tried to steal me....I know about her now, I will be careful, but I don't like being in this unstable rotten territory. Her calling gets stronger and stronger as we fly deeper toward her nest. It's dangerous, and I have to leave my half of me here, I hate it I hate it I hate it...!

Me and Half Of Me and Friend fly as far as we dare. But me and Friend are scared of being caught by that bad queen so that we start losing our minds again like we did before, we don't dare get any closer.

Half Of Me sleeps together with us, curled up between us so we can keep His small scaleless body warm. I have become a day-creature for Him, I was a night-creature before but my other half loves the sun, so now I love the sun too and I must sleep at night or I will be so tired during the day with Him...but I will not have Him during the day anymore and I will not have Him at night either, He is leaving me, it hurts it hurts it hurts....

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The sun is shining. We are fed. We are sad. Half Of Me is caressing us and squeezing us with His forelegs like He's trying to claim us, He is so sad and I know He is telling us goodbye.

"Ours," we mark Him. "Our precious thing that we love."
He leaves us. He is gone. He is gone. He is gone.

I can't fly, I am grieving too much. Finally Friend picks me up and carries me away like prey. He carries me and carries me, finally I stop being sad because I'm so uncomfortable. I don't like being carried like prey.

...I did this to Half Of Me, too. I hurt Him SO MUCH and I also hurt Him like this. Did I ever do anything to the one I love that was good instead of hurting hurting hurting?!??!

I fly the rest of the way home, but I am too very much sad. I creep into my aerie and curl up in a corner so I can be Sad.

This is what it feels like to be dying of grief.

This is how Half Of Me felt.

I made Him feel like this, and now He's making me feel like this. We are two halves, so we know how to love each other and we know how to kill each other.

It is taking too long for me to die. I want to die, but my body won't, it's too strong.

I stumble out of my aerie, I'm weak but not dying yet. "Alpha!"

"What is it? ...Oh, poor little flockling...."
"I miss Him. I miss Him so much that my name is Missing Him. It hurts so much that I don't know what to do."

"Come here. Rest." I stay close to Alpha for a long time and let Him comfort me. He loves me loves me, we belong to each other, but He loves all His other flocklings and they all belong to each other, too....

That is why my precious one was half of me. Me. He belonged to me most and I tried so much to belong to Him most, we were special together. I love Alpha, I trust my flockmates, but Half Of Me was the only only one who could lie on my back and fly with me, and talk to me as if He was my own self. "I...miss...Him...."

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I am lying in this spot that He claimed. It smells like grief and sick and anger and despair, but I still want to be here because it smells like Him.

Friend comes and pulls me away from the grief/sick/anger/despair place, and I'm too weak to stop him. "Please don't die, Friend."

"Dying without Half Of Me."

"Please don't. I lost Half Of Me and I lost Half's Child. I don't want to lose you my friend, too."

I look at Friend. He knows exactly how this grief feels. He lost his other half, too...and she's not even still alive far away, she's dead.

"...What will make me alive again, Friend?"

"You are already alive. You think you're not, but you are. Get up. Our flock needs you. You cannot give yourself to your other half anymore, so you will give yourself to your flock."

Yes. It is selfish to lie here and die. I will not grieve for Half Of Me here, alone and giving up. I will grieve for Him as I tend to my flockmates and protect them and feed them and teach them.
"Half Of Me is with his precious things that he loves again. He is happy now. Someday I will be happy because my other half is happy, even though He's far away from me...."
Beloved, chapter 5 (final)

Carried Off: Beloved, a DreamWorks' How to Train Your Dragon fanfic by Raberba girl

Chapter 5 (rough draft)

This silly troop of juveniles came with us, and now they're teaching the fledglings how to do silly
crazy useless fun tricks. "Now close your wings, close your wings!"

"?! But I will fall if I do that!"

"YES, YES, FALL-!" the juveniles crow gleefully, and they do it to show the fledglings. Our trick
that Half Of Me taught us, I miss Him so much I miss Him so much I miss Him so much.... The
fledglings are shocked and confused and a little scared.

"Stop that!" I roar. "Crazy useless fun tricks are for people who already know how to fly. They are
fledglings, this is their first hunting flight, don't scare and confuse them!"

A fledgling closes her wings and drops. She screams and struggles and snaps out her wings again
but she's all wrong now, ugh stupid younglings her wings are all wrong and can't catch the wind,
now I have to save her.

"I SAID DON'T DO CRAZY TRICKS UNTIL AFTER YOU LEARN TO FLY WELL."

"Sorry, sorry...!"

"YOU TROOP, SILLY BAD TROOP DISTRACTING THEM, GO AWAY."

I teach the fledglings some more, a few of them catch fish but the rest of them are so bad at it,
uuuuggghhh I'm so frustrated, I don't like younglings, Friend likes them better, I wish he was here to
teach them instead of me.... We have to finish this hunting-flight soon, a storm is coming.

"NIGHTWING!" That is a guardian, she is rushing toward us, there is danger?! But no, she's very
much excited...? "NIGHTWING, GO HOME GO HOME GO HOOOOOME!"
"Danger?! Danger?!" Why is she so happy if there's danger?!

"NOT DANGER! NIGHTWING GO HOME! HALF OF YOU CAME BACK!"

WHAT. No. No, this is an impossible thing, Half Of Me is gone forever, but my wings are pumping and I'm rushing rushing rushing home, if it's a trick joke bad not-true thing I will be SO UPSET.

"Half Of Me...?! Half Of Me...?!"

I dive into the nest and I know where He is now, Friend is there Friend brought Him, Alpha is talking to Him, our flockmates are greeting Him.

Him, my Half Of Me. I rush to Him, something's wrong with Him but there's always been something wrong with Him, and it doesn't matter now because even though monsters I can't fight are still riding Him, He sees me and He wants me and He's reaching for me, He wants me, He wants me. He's not leaving me. He came back, He wants to be close to me.

"HALF OF ME HALF OF ME HALF OF ME. MINE MINE MINE MINE MINE MINE MINE MINE."

"Mine...mine...." He's so weak with grief, but now it's wants-to-be-with-me grief instead of wants-to-leave-me grief. He crawls onto my back and we fly, at last we are together and two-who-are-one again.

We fly straight into the storm. The wind tears at my wings and tries to tear Half Of Me from my back, but it's okay. We fly together and roar together and fight the storm together, and we win.

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Something is wrong with my other half. It's like his children who are so precious to Him were both His other halves, too. It's like He lost them and is dying of grief like me-who-was, except He is giving His whole self to me and not-dying because I'm His third other half and I'm still alive. He is dying and not-dying at the same time, these monsters who ride Him are so cruel and I hate that I can't fight them.
The only time He's good and whole is when we are flying together, but He's so broken the rest of the time that He needs to fly so much, and He wears me out. I want so much to help Him, but my body isn't strong enough.

"Let me fly him." Friend takes Half Of Me away back into the sky, and I rest.

I sleep for so long, I don't wake up until Friend comes back, Friend is exhausted and now he needs to sleep, but Half Of Me is already begging, "Toothless, fly?" Yes, I will fly Him...I hope that Friend is rested enough to fly Him again when I come back too tired. Will Half Of Me ever get tired? Will He be fleeing His grief forever?

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He needs to fly so much, our flockmates start helping us. I'm so tired, I hear Him wailing out there, I must go tend to Him and comfort Him... No, Falls picked Him up, He's flying with Falls now so He stopped crying. I can sleep a little more.

o.o.o.o.o

"Listen to me." Alpha is giving orders to the whole flock. "Our flockmate Human, he is heart-sick. His troop is taking care of him as best they can, but his heart is very much strong and this sickness runs very deep into it, so sometimes his sickness is too powerful for them. All of you must be alert. When he falls, you must catch him; when he is cold, you must warm him; when he is hungry, you must feed him. He is too heart-sick to take care of himself, so if we don't take care of him, he will die."

I'm scared that I can't make my Half Of Me better, but at least our whole flock will help me tend to Him now....

o.o.o.o.o

Half Of Me is asleep with Friend, worn out from fleeing His grief and from talking to Alpha. Now Alpha wants to talk to me. "I don't know if humans are monsters or not monsters."
"My human is not a monster anymore!"

"Broken is not a monster. Clever Paws was not a monster. But they are only two, and the humans who cause so much pain are many...."

"It was humans who hurt Half Of Me, yes?"

"Yes...I am disturbed when he tells me of it...."

"What did they do to Him, to break Him so much?!"

"So hard to understand. His children, yes? His. He loves them like he loves you, he is their sire who takes care of them and raises them...why did they take them away from him??"

"WHO TOOK MY HALF'S PRECIOUS THINGS AWAY FROM HIM?!" I will kill them and retrieve His precious things and bring them back to Him!

"So strange and disturbing. His own pack, his own mate. He was kind and helped dragons escape from captivity, but this is a terrible crime in his pack?!?! Why?! Why?! He did this very good thing, but they say he is bad, they punish him so cruelly, they keep his precious things with them but they drive him out away from the pack, if he did not have a flock here to retrieve him and love him, he would die! Why would they do such a terrible thing when he did nothing wrong?! Why? I don't understand it...I don't understand it...."

"THIS HUMAN PACK IS CRAZY AND ROTTEN AND BAD. WE WILL BURN IT UNTIL ALL OF IT IS BLACK AND DEAD. But not Half Of Me’s precious things, we will save them first and bring them here safe to Him. THEN we will burn His horrible bad rotten nest."

"He said no. Why? He said no. He wanted to do this thing, but he said no, so much death and pain is bad, he says we must let these monsters live, he says he must spare them because they are his packmates-who-were.... This strange terrifying human love. Human love means you value parents and littermates and mates and offspring ONLY because they are your parents and littermates and mates and offspring; human love means you do not turn on your packmates even when they turn on you, ONLY because they are your packmates; human love means that you love your babies and miss them so much and grieve to be away from them ONLY because they are your babies; human love...human love is crazy and hurts so much."
I'm shivering as I listen to Alpha. He can talk with my human other half but even He can't understand humans.

"It hurts so much," Alpha says, "but human love can protect a whole human pack from a very much stronger dragon flock; human love can connect a parent and child even though they lost each other forever; a human with human love can shield a nightwing who stole him and hurt him and took him for his own even though he didn't give himself to him; human love means one can have an other half and another other half and another, all at the same time; human love can make one two halves with someone who caused him so much pain.... Human love is so powerful and terrifying, I don't understand it."

I'm frightened. And...awed. "Alpha? ...Is Half Of Me a king?" He can't be a sea-king because He is not a sea creature, and He can't be a sky-king because He can't even fly on His own. Maybe He is a land-king??

"This is what I wonder. I think maybe yes."

I'm shocked. How can anyone BREAK a king?! How?! But...to break someone so very much, and for Him to still be alive and still have love in His heart...only a king could do that.

"...I must take very good care of my broken land-king Half Of Me."

"Yes."

o.o.o.o.o

Half Of Me is one of those people, like Friend. It's not just His own babies that He loves; He loves ALL BABIES. I do not like babies! It's difficult to be a doesn't-like-babies person whose troopmates love babies...!

"I love you," Half Of Me tells so many babies, laughing His human laughter. "You are adorable and sweet and precious and funny, and it makes me feel good to take care of you~"

That is why I have to let Half Of me love babies! I do not like that He loves them, but I like that they
make Him feel better. Aaaaggghhh, this is difficult and annoying....

"Broken!" Whiptail comes to greet Half Of Me.

"Well, hey there, you. And aaaaawww, look who we have here!" Half Of Me crouches down to show affection to her eager brood.

"Hello, Broken!" Whiptail says. I know what she wants, noooooo.... "I will leave and rest, and you will take care of my babies until I come back."

"Yaaaayyyy!" her hatchlings cheer, "New toy!" Their mother flies away.

"Whoa, wait, you forgot your kids! Uh.... Well, I guess I'm babysitting you guys?" He laughs even though that little green one is pulling on Him too hard and hurting Him! "Ow, haha. Hey, little guy, let's gnaw on something else, okay?" He picks up a seal bone toy and teases the hatchlings with it.

"Yaaaaahhh, get the monster dead thing!"

"Yaaahhhhh!!!"

"Whoa! Haha, man, you guys are rambunctious...!"

I wake up because Half Of Me is crying in His human way that makes me nervous, wailing with salt water streaming down His face.

I start to comfort Him, but one of the older hatchlings is already here, crooning and rubbing her face against His and letting Him squeeze her hard with His forelegs even though it pins her wings. "It's okay, Broken, it's okay," she croons, "you are safe here in this good nest with these flockmates who love you, they are surrounding you protecting you, I love you, we will fill up your heart with love until there is no more room for grief."
He's still whimpering and clutching her, but He's quieter now and I think it's good for Him to have a person who's small enough for Him to cover with His body. Maybe it reminds Him of His small lost babies that He would hold like that, or maybe He's so small and defenseless that it's very frustrating to be dominated and protected *all the time*, maybe He needs someone weaker than Him that He can protect and make Him feel strong. I comfort Him, too. She is warming up at Him and I am warming down at Him, together we cover Him and reassure Him.

"I miss them so much...I miss them...so...much...."

I like this hatchling. She is very young, but she still loves Half Of Me and protects Him from the other hatchlings and wants to take care of Him. She worries about Him when she has to leave Him, so she's trying to grow up fast fast fast so she can leave her parents and join our troop and be close to Half Of Me more often.

"*It's okay, Friend,*" says Friend. "*I will help you.*"

"*I will help, too~!*" Hen cheers. (Half Of Me's sound-name for her is "Hen," so I keep thinking that sound when I think of her.) "*Friend Broken my human will have babies~ I will help him take care of them and be a good mama to them!*"

Half Of Me is a good mama because He loves His babies so much. He is not a very good *dragon* mama, but that's not His fault, it's only because He's human and doesn't know any better, and it's okay because I and Friend and Hen are all good dragons and we help. He is a good mama on His own, and He's a good dragon mama because He has His whole troop to help him.

The eggs hatch at night. Half Of Me is startled at first, He thinks there is danger?? There are very many things He doesn't know, maybe He *doesn't know* His eggs are hatching even though Friend is
trying to tell Him to go tend to His baby that just hatched, and all the other dragons are trying to stay away so that Half Of Me will be the first adult His baby sees and he will know He is his mama.

"Hungry, hungry! Confused uncomfortable I don't like it hungry!" the hatchling cries. Why won't his mama go to him???

The second egg hatches, Half Of Me rushes to shield Himself. Oh! His soft flesh will get hurt if those hot sharp pieces of shell hit Him!

But it's okay now, Half Of Me is safe, and now He's finally going to His babies. "I am your mama, this is my scent, I love you." That's all He says, He won't clean them very well or mark them properly, siiigh.

I wait until the hatchlings know for sure who their mama is, then I go to feed them so they'll shut up. I'm a little comforted when my other half caresses me and tells me I did well.

Ohhh...He was waiting. He was scared to leave His new babies the way He lost His old ones, but now that I'm here to watch over them, He leaves to get His not-tongue cleaning things and then He comes back. He won't use His tongue because He's a silly human, but He still cleans the birth-slime off of His babies.

I already know He can't mark His children because He can't mark us very well, either, but it's okay, He has trooppmates to help Him and make good marks on His babies for him. Alpha marks them as His new flocklings and is very happy because Half Of Me is finally, FINALLY mostly happy. It was very good to let Him adopt these orphans. The precious things that He lost and grieved so much for were His children, so now He has children again to be precious to Him and soothe His pain.

We take care of the new babies, and now they are tired and so are we. They find their mama and curl into Him, He is very soft for them to rest against. I lie down with my other half; I am very good for Him to rest against. Our whole troop is safe and together, and finally, finally, finally, our human that we love is happy.
Astrid's role as the chief was enough of a given by now that the only significant effect her divorce had was on the gossip. Sometimes, though, she felt like the gossip alone was bad enough.

"...had her mewing like a kitten, haha!"

Astrid froze with a bowl of soup in her hands, about to pass the table where the others of her generation were gathered to eat. None of them had noticed her yet.

"I would have paid to see you taking Miss High-And-Mighty down a few notches," Ruffnut cackled.

"Nah, she wasn't that bad," Snotlout responded in what he probably thought was a generous way. "She was like...a little kid. With a fantastic ass and a rock-hard fist."

"You have a thing for little kids?" Tuffnut said, raising an eyebrow.

"Not like that, man! I mean she-- I wanted to protect her, you know? I wanted to make her happy." Snotlout thumped his chest. "Seriously, I make, like, the best husband, all that protect and provide stuff."

"Yeah, the best husband," Ruffnut snorted. "Maybe next time you'll last more than three weeks."

"Hey, that wasn't my fault! She just didn't know how to handle a real man. After all, she's never had one before, heh."

"But Hiccup must have been doing something right," Fishlegs pointed out, "since she never actually divorced him-- Eep!" The first one to finally notice Astrid, he stared at her, panicked.
Astrid had to say something now that all of their attention was fixed on her. Too mortified to think straight, the only thing she could come up with was, "Hiccup knew how to treat a woman. You should have taken lessons from him before the dragons ruined him, Snotlout." She walked away.

Hiccup had seen dragons with injuries before, but this was the first time he connected the injuries to human interference.

The small newcomer was howling in pain and anger, lashing his tail, blood staining his hind leg - which was still caught in a trap. The dragon had apparently managed to break the chain, but hadn't been able to free himself from the cruel iron clamped on his flesh.

Hiccup stared, having come along with all the others investigating the newcomer. Some dragons attempted to comfort the injured male, and others tried licking at his wound. Finn crept up to Cloudjumper's back to hide; Valka hurried forward, chirping curiously until she caught a whiff of the blood and was nearly hit by a flailing limb, sending her fleeing to her mother's arms.

Hiccup handed off his daughter to Hen and began to cautiously approach. The injured dragon caught sight of him and went nuts, spitting fire and screaming.

Hiccup instinctively threw up his arms in defense, but Toothless had already jumped in front of him like a living shield, snarling and spreading his wings wide. Many of the other dragons were roaring as well in defense of their little human flockmate.

The injured dragon whimpered in fear and confusion, cringing away from the human he wasn't allowed to threaten. Hiccup dropped to the ground and held out his open hands, showing that they were empty. "I am not a threat."

The dragon growled fearfully.

"Ssshhh, it's okay, I won't hurt you. I just want to look." Hiccup crawled closer and examined the trap without touching it. His jaw tightened as he took in the damage. He had come a long way from his days of thinking that dragons deserved any harm that befell them - now, he felt that anyone who would maim a creature like this was a monster. "I can...I can do this, I need--"
He hurriedly scrambled backward and then up to his feet when he was far enough away from the frightened dragon. "Toothless!" Even as he spoke, he was sliding onto his partner's back and the Night Fury's wings were unfurling. They leaped into the air, followed by their curious troopmates, and Hiccup guided them to the cave he lived in with his dragon family. "Right here, right here, Toothless, just a minute--"

He grabbed the metal bar he needed and hurried back to the injured dragon. "Okay...okay, ssshhh, it's all right...this might hurt a bit but I promise I'm only trying to help you." He set the tip of the bar between the teeth of the trap and tried to pry it open.

No matter how careful he was, he couldn't avoid jostling the injury. The dragon screeched in pain and started to snap at Hiccup, but Cloudjumper caught the dragon and pinned him down with a fierce snarl before those fangs could reach the defenseless human. Shakily, Hiccup tried again, but yelped and stumbled back when the dragon managed to belch a tongue of flame at him.

An ear-splitting roar from the alpha instantly transformed the injured dragon's thrashing rage into quivering silence. Hiccup, his heart aching at the dragon's terror and pain, tried again to pry open the trap, and cursed himself when it became obvious he wasn't strong enough, at least not when he was trying to be delicate and didn't have better tools.

Tentatively, Toothless set both paws on the end of the bar and pushed, just as Hiccup had done. Hiccup hadn't been expecting that, so the bar was at a loose, ineffective angle, and it simply rolled away. Toothless cringed back at his failure.

"No, no, you had the right idea!" Hiccup exclaimed, encouraged by the thought that maybe he didn't have to do this alone. He petted and praised the Night Fury until Toothless looked hopeful again. Then he retrieved the bar, held it lower down its length, and poised a rock on the lip of the trap, using his foot to hold it in place. He indicated the far end of the bar again. "Toothless, push."

This time, he was holding the bar in place and guiding it as Toothless applied his strength. The jaws of the trap were pried open, and as they did, Hiccup quickly shoved with his foot, wedging the rock into the trap's jaws and holding them open. He had intended to extricate the injured leg gently, but the dragon gave a frantic kick. The trap snapped completely closed and fresh blood gushed from the wound, but the cruel piece of metal was skittering away, no longer clamped on flesh.

The dragon flopped to the ground, limp and exhausted, whimpering at the pain. Other dragons crowded back around him, tending to his wound and comforting him. Hiccup exhaled in relief and backed away, temporarily forgotten by all but his family.
And the alpha. "You knew how to help him."

Hiccup was too ashamed to answer at first, but finally managed, "My people, evil cruel monsters, we make these 'traps' these hurting things...we make them, so we know how to loose them...."

He was distracted from his shame by Finn nestling into his arms and purring, as Valka flapped around him, crowing, "Mama is the best~ Mama is the best~"

"Very good to have a not-monster human in my flock again," the king said, his mind-voice tinged with an uncharacteristically crafty tone.

Hiccup stared at him. "...I have a new job now, don't I," he realized, not really sure how to react. "I am your good slave/tool, I will undo these bad human weapons for you and rescue your dragons from them." He absently put out a hand to stroke Toothless as the Night Fury bumped against him, asking for caresses.

"Not a slave, not a lifeless thing. You are my flockling who loves your good flock, you know these things that none of us know, you will love and help and protect your flockmates by doing this thing only you can do."

"Yes...."

"Your mother that you love, this is what she did for us, too."

"What?! Mom?!"

The alpha showed him memories of Valka destroying traps and opening cages and treating inflicted wounds.

"Mom...."
Astrid had been so frustrated with Finn’s anxious sensitivity as an infant that she thought he would continue to be the more troublesome of the twins as they got older. She was surprised to find that it was Valka who became her real trial, far less obedient and more of a troublemaker than her brother.

The first time she felt the need to discipline her children, they were two years old and likely hadn’t meant to purposefully cause damage. But that was food they were ruining, precious and irreplaceable food, now mixed with pitch and being smeared around on the floor by two giggling toddlers who had no idea that they had just consigned themselves to a very hungry night.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!!"

Finn cowered immediately; Valka stared up at her mother in wide-eyed confusion. She held up her sticky black hands. "Playing, Mama!"

"Food is NOT for playing with! Do you even understand what you've done?!!"

"Sorry, Mama, sorry, Mama, sorry, sorry," Finn begged.

He was so small and terrified that her anger faded, and she breathed deeply to calm herself down. 'Good,' she realized, 'this is good.... He wouldn't have wanted me to punish them when I'm angry. I can do this. He thought I couldn't, but I can. I can do this right.' She held out her hands. "Come here."

Finn crept close; Valka trotted.

Their mother held them and looked earnestly into their eyes. "Listen to me. Food is a very precious, important thing. If you play with it and ruin it, it hurts us. We'll be so hungry, but there will be nothing to eat because you ruined it. Do you understand that you can't play with food? You have so many toys, you can play with them as much as you want, but food is only for eating."

"And dragons," Valka added.

"...No, honey. Dragons are thieves. They take our food even though it doesn't belong to them, and then we're hungry and get hurt. They take and take until there's almost nothing left, and then when
you take the little there is left and ruin it.... That's very bad, Valka. Do you understand?"

"Very bad."

"All right. You have to remember that. That's why I have to punish you, so you'll remember the next time and won't do it again."

Valka's eyes widened as if she had just realized she was still in trouble. Finn, his head hanging silently as if he had already known, whimpered a little and clutched his mother's arm as she gripped the front of his tunic and bent him over. He burst into tears the instant she started spanking him, which startled her because she was taking care to swat him lightly - she wasn't actually hurting him, he had no reason to cry.

"Mama, what are you doing to him?!"

"Next time, you'll know to do the right thing." Hesitantly, she gave him a couple more token swats, then released him. He collapsed in a sobbing heap.

"Finn! Finn! Does your bottom hurt?" his sister cried, crouching down to pat his hair.

"Your turn, Val," Astrid said, reaching for her. Her daughter gave her a shocked, wide-eyed look before suddenly taking off. Astrid gaped after her for a moment, then set off in pursuit. Valka was fast and agile for such a young child, and also screaming bloody murder as she fled. If the weather hadn't been bad enough for them to be trapped inside the house, Astrid was certain her daughter would have run out the door.

As it was, Astrid had to chase her for several minutes, and was furious by the time she caught the little girl. She stormed over to the table, shoved her still shrieking daughter facedown onto it, and slapped her palm hard against the child's squirming backside.

"I HATE YOU, MAMA, I HATE YOU!" Val screamed, dry-eyed and as furious as her mother.

Astrid came back to herself as she was raising her hand for the third or fourth strike. A tremor went through her as she realized what she was doing.
Shakily, Astrid tugged down the child's leggings, dreading what she would find. She didn't know what she expected, but was relieved to see that the girl's bottom was only a little red. It wouldn't bruise, there was no injury, she hadn't abused her own child....

Uneasily, Astrid pulled the leggings back up and spanked her daughter once more, calmly and almost gently this time as if to prove to herself that she could, then set the child on her feet.

"I hate you, Mama!" Val cried furiously. "You're a BAD MAMA!"

"Shut up," Astrid snapped. "You were bad, too, for ruining food, that's the whole reason I had to spank you in the first place."

"You HURT ME!"

"Then be good next time, and I won't have to do it again." She looked up and saw Finn by the stairs, staring at her, looking frightened and still tearful. She reached out a hand to him. "Come here, Finn."

"Please, Mama, please, Mama, please--!"

"I'm not going to hurt you! That's finished now. Come here, I won't hurt you."

He crept to her and tried to burrow into her for comfort; it was difficult to pry him off and get him to stand on his feet. "Listen. You did a good job, Finn. A real man owns up to his mistakes and takes the punishment he deserves. Good job." He went quiet, staring at her hopefully. Astrid next looked at her daughter, frowning. "You, on the other hand, have disappointed me."

Valka stuck her tongue out.

Astrid gritted her teeth and went on, "Finn's punishment is over, but you have earned extra, for running away from me and being a coward, and now for disrespecting me."

"You can spank me and spank me, I won't cry like Finn," Valka declared, crossing her arms defiantly. "He's a baby; I'm a girl, I never cry!"
"I never said I was going to spank you again," Astrid snapped. "You're grounded. You are staying in my room until I say you can come out again, so that you learn to be brave and not a coward, and you're not allowed to talk to your brother."

Valka gasped, horrified, and struggled frantically in her mother's hands as Astrid dragged her over to the bedroom and shut her inside. "No, Mama, no, Mama, no, I'll be good, nooooooo...!"

When the door was shut and barred, Valka spent some time screaming and pounding on it, then eventually dissolved into sobs. Astrid, hating being trapped inside as they waited out the weather, struggled to mend some of the children's clothes to kill time. She looked up at one point to see Finn very quietly climbing onto the stool that he had somehow moved all the way to the bedroom door without her noticing. He would probably be high enough to reach the door handle.

"FINN BLACKMOLD HICCUPSON, GET AWAY FROM THAT DOOR."

Finn instantly scurried away, but Astrid did not immediately return to her work. She had called her child 'Hiccupson.' Legally, the children's surname was now their mother's, since their father had been disgraced and exiled, but... *They are Hiccup's children,* she thought. *He was a traitor and a dragon-lover, but...he still loved them, and he will always be their father.* If the children themselves wanted to change their name when they got old enough, she would let them - she didn't want them to be shamed by it, and she herself would still avoid using 'Hiccupson' in public. But for now, when they were too young to really understand what their father had done wrong....

By the time the weather let up long enough for Astrid's mother to make it back to the house, it was evening. Both children were cranky and whiny from hunger. Astrid's mother had already gone to the larder before Astrid could tell her what had happened. "Did you eat supper without me?"

"No, Mother," Astrid said, grabbing both her children so they would pay attention. Valka, still upset about being punished earlier, jerked fiercely, trying to get away; Finn cried for the hundredth time that he was hungryyyyyyy. "No," Astrid said more loudly, "we did not eat supper, and we aren't going to eat supper tonight, because the food we were supposed to eat for that meal has already been used up."

Her mother stared. Finn was now just crying wordlessly, and Valka was screaming louder than ever.

"Which means," Astrid snapped, giving both children a shake in a vain effort to shut them up, "the only one who gets to eat tonight is Grandma, because there is only enough food left for ONE
"I can--" Mrs. Hofferson started, but broke off when her daughter glared meaningfully at her.

Astrid made her children sit and watch their grandmother eat her meal, which Mrs. Hofferson did rather uncomfortably. "This is what happens when you waste food - there is not enough to go around. This is not a punishment, this is a consequence of your actions," Astrid lectured.

Finn couldn't bear to look and kept trying to hide his face against his mother. She alternated between prying him off and readjusting her restraining grip on Valka, who was straining toward the food and kept making angry attempts to break free.

It was while Astrid was focused on Val that she felt Finn burying his face against her again. Perhaps it had started out as comfort, but the familiarity must have reminded him, because now he was squirming to get under his mother's shirt. She froze, her eyes widening.

She'd had to wean her children early, the food shortages were too severe. No matter how legitimate the excuse was, she couldn't look her people in the face while she was getting more food than most of them, so she had stopped claiming the extra rations for nursing mothers. Her breasts had been dry for months now, but her hungry, crying children were instinctively seeking them out again.

Hopelessly, she let them try, but of course there was nothing for them. Valka soon gave up in frustration, giving an angry cry and striking her fist against her mother. Astrid just barely resisted the impulse to slap her; she seized the little girl's face and thundered, "Do not hit me."

"I'm HUNGRY!" Valka screamed.

"SO AM I, BUT I DON'T GO AROUND HITTING PEOPLE JUST BECAUSE I'M HUNGRY." Finn gave up as well, curled still and silent against his mother.

It was all enough of an ordeal to exhaust Astrid, and her patience was long gone by the time she started getting her still-cranky children ready for bed. She ended up spanking Valka again, though not Finn, since the mere threat of the punishment was enough to shut him up and send him rushing to huddle under the blankets.

Astrid, half-asleep, stroked Finn's back trying to lull him to sleep as well, tuning out the bedtime
story her mother was telling the children. Valka was exclaiming in delight, but the next thing Astrid knew, the room was dark and silent except for the wind howling outside. And Finn's voice.

"Mama?" he whispered insistently again.

"What, Finn," she mumbled.

"Where's your food?"

"What?"

"Me and Val were bad, no food for us.... But Mama wasn't bad. Where's Mama's food?"

She sighed, too tired to deal with this. "There was only enough for one. Grandma didn't do anything wrong, so Grandma got it."

"...Where's Mama's food?"

"Mama doesn't get any food," Astrid snapped. "A good chief eats last, Finn." She didn't know why she was telling him this, since she was planning to name her daughter as her heir rather than her son, but she forgot to follow that line of thought because Finn's little arms were encircling her neck. She instinctively tightened her own embrace around him. Her motherly instincts had been late to develop, but she did have them sometimes, particularly for her less exasperating child.

"I'm sorry, Mama," he whispered. "I won't be bad again. Can we eat tomorrow...?"

"Yes."

"Me AND Val AND Mama? AND Grandma? Eat tomorrow?"

"Yes, Finn. Go to sleep."
"I promise I'll be good tomorrow, Mama."

"Okay. Go to sleep, Finn."

"I love you, Mama."

She kissed his forehead. "I love you, too, Finn. Please go to sleep."

To be continued....

Author's Notes: I looked up the average age when Viking children were weaned. The sources vary; some say about two years old and others say as old as four, though I'm sure it depends on the circumstances.

I guess I'm a moderate when it comes to child discipline. I get mad at the people who beat and abuse their children yet try to minimize it by erroneously calling it "spanking," but I also get mad at the people who apparently think that children are angels who will always have perfect behavior if you just ask them nicely. Speaking from experience, I believe that the most important part of discipline is attitude, not method.

Ftr, Astrid didn't physically hurt Finn with that spanking AT ALL. He was so upset because he's terrified of displeasing authority figures, particularly his mother; the physical aspect of punishment is not an issue for him. (Valka is different, but more on her later.)

Despite a long conversation with my friend Anna about it (speaking of which, I forgot to give her credit for the "dragon slaying as a rite of passage" idea in both Official and the Inadequate re-write! And I think the "captive dragons get killed before every winter" idea here in this story, too), I still haven't figured out a completely satisfactory way to reconcile the HTTYD book names with the DreamWorks ones. X'D The TV show writers in particular just DON'T CARE about name continuity. Writing this story gave me the idea that maybe the HTTYD Vikings all have several names - a real one (like Astrid or Gustav), a troll-warding one (like Hiccup Horrendous Haddock or Snotlout), and a family name (like Hofferson or Thorston). Even though it doesn't fit 100%, I will use that convention from now on unless/until I think of something better...except that I messed up with "Mrs. Hofferson." X'D Anyway, so "Finn" is the kid's real name, "Blackmold" is his troll-warding name, and "Hiccupson" is his surname. I found a chance to use Valka's full name later, I think in the next chapter.
A/N: Everything from this point onward is temporarily messy and out of order. I discovered that it was easier to write the initial draft of this story arc one subplot at a time rather than hopelessly trying to keep track of everything. Once I finish the first draft of this story arc, I will go back and re-organize all those subplots into proper chapters. Please bear with me in the meantime.

Astrid avoided the thought for about a day, but then she realized that avoidance was cowardly and she needed to face her problems head on, no matter ashamed and uneasy she felt. She put her kids to bed and then went into the woods to think.

She had spanked her children. Such a thing was inevitable, all children needed discipline, and she was relieved and little proud of herself for getting it right with Finn.

What bothered her was the way she had treated Valka. She had lost her temper and struck the girl more out of a sense of vengeance than discipline, just as Hiccup had thought she would, and she hated that she had lost control like that. Not only that, but even though it had only been a spanking this time, what would happen when Valka was older and had a sharper tongue? What would happen when she became a wild and rebellious teenager, guaranteed to butt heads with her mother? Astrid needed to develop self-control now, at the beginning, or it would only get more difficult later.

’Why do I get so angry with Val and not with Finn?’ Finn was usually so obedient, so easy to intimidate. ...So much like Hiccup in a way, though Hiccup, despite usually submitting to his wife’s demands, had often had defiance smoldering in his eyes which his daughter had apparently inherited. ’Hiccup would make me so angry, too, though...he knew how to pick his battles. He knew when to give in and when to...push back.’

She now remembered uneasily how often she had hit Hiccup. He would make her so angry just like Valka did...as if they knew exactly what to say to make her fly into a rage, as if they wanted to purposely--
'I don't understand. Hiccup couldn't have wanted to be hurt; Val doesn't want to be hurt. But they defy me anyway, and....' It occurred to her that maybe it wasn't really right of her to expect to get her way all the time. 'But I don't expect that of anyone else! I know that the villagers and even my own mother don't agree with me most of the time, I count on it, I plan for it.... What makes Hiccup and the kids so different? Why do I...expect them to bow to my every whim?' In the children's case, it was because she was their parent and so much older than them. She knew the big picture, she knew what resources were available, she could plan for the future, she had so much more experience.

'But...Hiccup...what made me think that I was always right and he was wrong? What made me think I was better than him?' Well, she was better than him, there was no question of that; but she thought uneasily that he was at least better than how she had treated him. 'I...from the very beginning, I just assumed that he was the worst, and I....' What would have happened if she had been gentler with him, listened to him more, compromised more? She had done that, but not from the start. By the time she had learned better, he had already hated her. 'Would he have hated me so much if I'd been kinder to him?'

Well, it was too late for that now, Hiccup was gone. 'The kids, though. What do I do about the kids?' Fine, she was right and they were wrong; she had the right to discipline them when they misbehaved. ...But she needed to figure out how to do it in such a way that she stayed in control and didn't let her emotions rule her. 'I have to be able to stand there, looking into my daughter's eyes and hearing her speak poison, and be able to stay calm.'

How would Hiccup have handled his children if they ever defied or disrespected him? Astrid couldn't see him losing his temper and whaling on them. ...He had been disrespected plenty of times when he'd still lived in the village. He'd get hurt and angry, she started being able to tell when he was hurt and angry, but he expressed it so differently than his wife did. He held it in, he...sort of went still and hyper-alert, looking for any opening, any--

'That's how the weak fight. They know they can't win fairly, so they watch for an opening and grab any alternative they can, even if it's cheating. I'm not weak. I fight differently.'

Okay, but that was only when Hiccup was dealing with a wife or villagers who didn't actually like him. But when it was his own beloved children? Would his methods be different?

"I HATE YOU, DADDY!" Valka would scream. "You're a BAD DADDY!"

Hiccup probably wouldn't get angry. He wouldn't hit her. He'd look at her all sorrowfully and maybe say something like, "Really?" and she'd love him so much that she'd be ashamed and apologize and hug him, and everything would be hunky-dory again.
'That's not going to work for me,' Astrid thought. She didn't think her children loved her enough for that. 'But I still need to figure out how to stay calm and not let them bother me.' She sighed. What were the worst things her children could ever possibly say to her? "You're incompetent. Nobody loves you. You're a terrible chief. You can't protect or provide for your people. Everyone would be better off if you were dead. Stoick would be ashamed of you." She imagined each of her children saying those terrible things, and had to breathe deeply for a while.

'It's...it's not true. I am a good chief. I can provide for my people. ...I have to believe that even when people insist differently.' She imagined her children saying those things to her again. "I know you feel that way," she said aloud, "but that doesn't excuse what you did. Let's focus on that right now so we can make it better."

She practiced. She practiced in her imagination and with her children and with the villagers. It took her a long time, and she failed so often ("VALKA MUDBATH HICCUPSDAUGHTER, GET AWAY FROM THERE RIGHT NOW." "OW OW OW STOP IT MOMMY I HATE YOU I HATE YOU I HATE YOU...!"). She hated herself so much for failing until she realized that blaming herself was making it worse instead of better. 'It's okay if I make mistakes. It's okay to...to lose. It's okay to suffer. The important part is to get back up and try again and do better next time. ...And even if you do worse next time, the important part is that you tried. You tried your best.'

It helped, though when she thought of Hiccup yet again, about how many mistakes he made and how hard he really had tried and how very little mercy she had shown him...how little mercy anyone had shown him...she cried. And tried to banish him from her mind because he was gone, he might as well be dead, but then one day she realized that Hiccup might be gone but her memories of him were still here, so in her thoughts she begged him for his forgiveness and visualized how differently she would have done things if she'd had the chance to do her marriage over again from the start. She cried again when she thought of how badly the dragons had ruined him, and how good a man he could have been if she'd managed to hold onto him before the Night Fury got him, but now it was too late and they'd stolen his soul and she would never, ever have a chance to make it up to him....

'You have a second chance with his children. You can make better choices with our children,' she thought to herself.

She didn't make as many mistakes now, but it was still hard. "Guys...." 'What would Hiccup do, what would Hiccup do, what would Hiccup do....' "I'm just trying to understand. WHY did you dump chum all over the Ahlberg house. Why. Please explain to me." 'WHAT WOULD HICCUP DO.'

"Oh, okay," Tuffnut said eagerly, "so, let me explain our brilliant plan."

"We make the already-wrecked house smell like fish," Ruffnut said gleefully, "then the dragons
attack the house, and when they're distracted here NOT finding food, we get a chance to save the real food somewhere else!"

"But we'll STILL GET EXPLOSIONS!" Tuffnut cheered. "Totally win-win!"

"Except for the loss of the lumber, a lot of which is still reusable," Astrid pointed out, "and the nails, and some of the furniture, and the glass...."

"Uhhhhhhhh," both twins drawled in unison, before Tuffnut abruptly pointed at his sister and said self-righteously, "Her idea." Ruffnut punched him, and it instantly degenerated into a slugfest.

Astrid stared down at the Thorstons writhing at her feet, trying to make each other bleed. 'What. Would. Hiccup. Do.' "...Oh well," she said, trying not to wince as she heard her voice take on a slight nasally tone, "we got two or three days of extra work now, but, hey, if we want to get some explosions out of it...." The Thorstons paused and looked up at her with interest.

Astrid knew she had made significant progress the first time Snotlout copped a feel and she felt only a momentary impulse to blacken his eye. Instead, she said without missing a beat, "Give me five silver pieces."

"What?! Why?"

"Because I am not a whore, and if you're going to treat me like one, then you're going to do it to completion. An ass-grab costs five silver."

He got a crafty look in his eye.

"The price doubles each time."

"Soooooo, if we had sex--"

"Two hundred gold," she said instantly.
"What?!"

"That's by my exact preferences. Five hundred gold for your bare-minimum ones."

"That is SO MUCH MORE than your bride-price and your morning-gift combined, which you still have, by the way--!"

"And an extra hundred gold for each of your additional preferences," she added relentlessly.

"You're trying to bankrupt me!"

'Are you really that stupid?' "Or I could just arrange for you to be castrated. That would work, too."

Snotlout squealed and scurried away with a hand protectively cupped around his family jewels, and Astrid was rather astonished that he never again sexually harassed her to an extent that made her uncomfortable.

To be continued....
Finn...Val....

Hiccup sat up, abruptly wide awake, when he realized that his children were gone. "Finn! Val! Toothless, light."

There was a confused dragon croak in the darkness, then a blast of fire in the hearth. Hiccup scrambled to light the lamp and desperately searched the still shadowed corners of the cave, but there wasn't a trace of his children. The others were gone, too; only Toothless was left. "FINN! VALKA!"

He stumbled outside, calling and calling. Eventually Hen came scampering up to him with the little ones scuttling in her wake, and Cloudjumper settled to a landing nearby.

"Where were you?!!" Hiccup collapsed to his knees and snatched up his children, clutching them tightly. Finn wriggled until he finally managed to find a comfortable position; Valka squirmed completely out of Hiccup's grip, shook out her wings, perched on his back, and started preening his hair. "Don't EVER do that again, don't you ever wander off--! HEN! You thought it would be such a great idea to take them out playing in the middle of the night, what is wrong with you?! Don't you ever do that again!!"

The young dragon crouched, tail tucked tightly, staring up at Hiccup with wide, pained eyes as he scolded her. Cloudjumper approached and lowered his head protectively over the little dragon, hissing at Hiccup.

"Why are you taking her side?! You went with them, why didn't you tell me?! You can't do that! You can't take my children away from me and not even tell me!!"

Valka, disturbed by the noise, hopped off of Hiccup's back and went to go sniff inquisitively at Toothless's paws. As Hiccup was making a grab for her, Finn took the opportunity to stretch and wander off toward a ledge, spreading his wings to take flight.
"NO." Hiccup grabbed him up again. Finn yelped in protest and struggled. "No. You two are coming back home with me to sleep, it is not time to go galloping all over the nest getting into trouble!" They were squirming so much that he had to hold them too tightly to keep hold of them, and they were crying in distress by the time he got them corralled inside the pen he had made for them whenever he needed to make sure they stayed put. Finn hissed at him; Valka gave a mournful howl. "Stop that. Go to sleep." He happened to glance up at the other dragons and saw Toothless cringing against the wall, Hen crying as she hid behind Cloudjumper, and Cloudjumper's eyes fixed unwaveringly on Hiccup as he growled softly. "All of you! Don't look at me like that!"

Valka was yelping and writhing on her back as if she was being tortured, even though no one was touching her. Finn kept trying to claw and shove out of the pen, getting more stubborn every time Hiccup pushed him back. "Stop that."

Cloudjumper finally looked at the hatchlings and made a long, ratchety sort of noise. Valka crawled on her belly to the side of the pen closest to Hiccup and pawed pleadingly at it until Hiccup reached through to caress her. She buried her face in his palm, whimpering. Finn exhaled a cloud of smoke and curled up in a tight, huffy ball with his back to Hiccup. Hiccup wasn't sure if they actually slept, but they did go quiet and still for a long time. It took Hiccup a long time to fall back asleep as well, and even then, he slept fitfully, waking again and again from horrible half-dreams where he thought his children were being ripped out of his arms. In the morning, Valka, extra-clingy, climbed into his tunic to be carried around by him, even though she was getting too big and heavy to do that anymore. Finn kept sulking, curled up in the pen even though it was open now, refusing to respond to his mother.

"Finn...come on, buddy, it's morning, you can come out and play now. Val, it's okay, you're not in trouble anymore. ...Guys, come on."

Everyone got over that incident eventually...but then there was another. "I TOLD you not to take them off without telling me!!"

And then another. "You guys KNOW BETTER, why do you keep doing this?!"

Hiccup eventually had to face the fact that his children were their own people, young but growing, dependent on him but not simply extensions of himself. He couldn't hold onto them forever. He couldn't forbid them to ever leave his sight. The knowledge tore at his heart and made him grieve in a way he had not done since before the twins' hatching, and he thought with despair that life was too painful, that he couldn't stand to keep living even in this place of refuge....
Toothless was licking him a little desperately, as if trying to call him back. Hiccup was curled against the Night Fury, warm in the dragon's embrace, alone because his children were off who-knew-where again, yet not alone because...he was never alone. Not once had he ever been truly alone in exile.

"What am I going to do?" he whispered to Toothless, who croaked hopefully at him. "I can't take anymore of this...my heart keeps breaking again and again and again, and it hurts so much...."

After a while longer, just lying together with his dearest companion, being held and comforted and anchored, Hiccup finally acknowledge the fact that his children...whether they were dragon or human...would not be children forever. They would grow up someday and leave him. They would love others more than they loved him. No matter what he did, he would lose them, and it had never been his job to hold onto them. He was simply meant to take care of them and protect them and love them, help them grow to be the best people they would be, and allow them to take flight when they were ready.

"It hurts...so much...." He cried a little more, then he went to see the king.

"Grieving for your hatchlings??"

"Something's wrong with me.... She hurt me too much. They hurt me too much, those Berk humans. Hurt me, took away my babies HURT ME, tore me apart when they took my babies, now these Finn Val precious dragons, my babies, so so so afraid so AFRAID they will take them away from me again, leave me, leaving me all alone bleeding hurt alone left me alone they left me they left me they left me...!" He'd thought he hadn't had any tears left to cry, but here he was, sobbing again. The sense of abandonment and loneliness and loss was devastating.

For a long time, the alpha didn't know what to say. It grieved and angered him to see his flockling's pain, it astonished him to see how much damage could be done to a single person. Finally, because he'd known from past experience that Hiccup could never seem to be fully convinced that he was deeply loved and would never be alone again, the alpha ventured, "It's okay to be alone lost broken."

Hiccup sniffled, considering.

"You won't die."

"I won't die.... ...Want to die."
"You will be happy if you're dead?"

"......No," Hiccup finally admitted.

"Be happy. Be broken grieving crushed. Be comforted. Be happy. It's okay to be broken grieving crushed, because you will call for us and we will comfort you. Again and again and again, always."

Hiccup exhaled a deep, shaky breath. "Yes...it's good...but I want to be fixed."

"What does fixed Hiccup look like?" the alpha asked. He knew what his idea of a whole, healthy Hiccup looked like, but he had learned long ago that humans thought quite differently than he did.

Hiccup thought. He imagined himself laughing, happy...surrounded by family, by parents who were proud of him, a wife who adored and looked up to him, beautiful brave children who made him proud in turn.... He imagined, just for a moment, himself as big and strong, but it didn't feel right. He didn't want to be a Viking, he simply wanted to be valued as he was. He imagined...a prosperous, thriving village, peace on the horizon, unrestrained flight, plentiful and mouth-watering food, books, allies, celebrations.... He imagined himself with bright eyes and laughter, he imagined himself looking at whatever fate threw at him and meeting it with confidence, knowing what to do, having support at his back--

Fear.

Fear of being rejected by his father, of being hurt or killed by a dragon, of not having enough to eat, of how in the world he could run a village when he was completely unprepared, of being despised by his wife, of being hurt, of being alone, of failing, of losing what he treasured....

"Fixed Hiccup has no fear," Hiccup finally decided.

He felt the king 'gathering' for something. Hiccup braced himself, sensing that whatever the alpha was about to say next would have none of the cushioning the dragon king usually used when speaking to his delicate little flockling.

"HAVE NO FEAR."
Hiccup cried out with the almost painful force of it, and for a second he thought he might weep from the intensity - but instead he stood up, and he roared for Toothless, and he leapt off the alpha without looking but without any intention of dying, feeling a sudden sense of assurance.

Sure enough, he was caught by a Monstrous Nightmare. He laughed and kissed her scales and leaped from her to a Snafflefang, poised there for two seconds, lost his balance and fell, reached up casually to catch the claws of a swooping Raincutter, heard Toothless's worried screech behind him, laughed again and dropped, settling onto his friend's back and squeezing the Night Fury in an impulsive hug. "Let's fly, bud."

They raced the wind for half an hour and found an island and caught a deer for supper. They leisurely glided home and found the rest of their troop anxiously waiting for them. Hiccup, relieved despite it all, cuddled his chirping son and daughter and fed them scraps of deer and told them they were wonderful; he hugged Hen and told her she was the best sister/aunt ever; he caressed Cloudjumper and thanked him for always looking out for their little family.

Hiccup sprawled beside his sleeping hatchlings that night and journaled for hours. He imagined the worst, if something were to happen and he lost his children forever, and he wept again, but this time his tears dried without the sense of devastation and despair that had dogged him for so long. He wrote letters, letters that would never be read, to the people of Berk and to the human children it had been too painful to truly think about until now, to the woman who had hurt him so badly, to the parents who had abandoned him, and to the blacksmith who was perhaps as broken as Hiccup himself was.

The tears this time were silent. 'It's okay...to be broken. It's okay, because I'm not afraid anymore. I'm not afraid. I've survived the worst, and there will always, always be something to live for. If I lose that, too, something else will come. Whether I live or die, there will always be something. Have no fear.'

To be continued....
One dragon raid was particularly traumatic. Astrid had been fighting as usual, secure in the knowledge that her daughter and her son were safely in the caves... Then she'd heard children's screams, and she'd instantly known without conscious thought, and she slaughtered a Monstrous Nightmare in record time and found her children cowering in a corner of the now empty food storage shed, terrified and trapped by flaming debris.

She got them out. Her heart felt numb, afterward she and her weapon were coated with dragons' blood and she was sitting there having her neck and chest treated for burns as her children sobbed in her lap. Then she took them home and asked them what had happened, her voice sounding as numb as her heart.

Finn looked completely miserable and ashamed. She knew at once that whatever had happened was his fault, even though he wouldn't say a word. Valka was loud, verbose, her shoulders straight and her head up and her eyes flashing in 'battle mode,' but with a frantic note in her voice that her mother knew meant she was protecting her brother. "I had a GOOD IDEA, Mommy, I said we should go fight dragons 'cause me and Finn are good fighters, we went and we SAVED THE FOOD but then the bad Zippleback stole it and--" She started crying, traumatized by the memory. "A-A-And then the, the Monstrous N-Nightmare was, we didn't die, we're good fighters--"

"Mommy got hurt," Finn whispered, staring in anguish at the bandages on his mother.

"That's not OUR fault," Valka said shrilly, "maybe mine a little, not Finn's fault, Finn is a good boy, he's boring and always follows the rules, I'm a bad girl but it's okay, you can spank me, Mommy, I won't cry, I'm not a stupid baby like Finn, I can take my punishment like a grown-up, I--"

"Why did you leave the caves?"

"I told you, I had a good idea--"

"You both nearly got killed. I nearly got killed. We lost all the food in that shed." Finn was sobbing again. "I am your mother and I am your chieftain. I gave you orders, you know the rules,
"I'm sorry, Mommy...!" Finn wailed, nearly drowned out by his sister's resolute, "I'M SORRY, MOMMY!"

"Whose idea was it to leave the caves?"

Finn silently pressed his hands over his face; Valka immediately cried "ME! ME! ME! ME! ME!"

How to handle this? "...Well, Valka, if you're so eager to take the blame, then you'll get your wish. You're grounded and are not allowed to speak to your brother for one week."

"But you should spank me instead! I'm a bad girl, I did a bad thing--!"

"I said you're grounded, Val."

"No! I don't want to be grounded! All the other mommies spank their kids when they're bad, you always say you'll spank us if we're bad, why do you always ground me instead?! I--"

"Now it's nine days instead of seven, because you're arguing with me."

"NO, MOMMY!" Valka screamed desperately. "I, I, I, I won't talk to Finn until tomorrow! Please, Mommy, you can spank me and I won't eat any dinner and I won't talk to Finn until--"

"Ten days."

"Noooooooo," Val sobbed, clinging to her, "noooooooo, noooooooo, please, Mommy, please...!"

"Go into the room, Val," Finn begged tearfully, "before she makes it more, and more, and more...."

Sobbing, Valka dragged herself off her mother's lap and trudged into the bedroom and shut herself
in, still crying disconsolately.

"Am I grounded, too?" Finn asked in a low voice.

"If you had told the truth, then yes," Astrid said, and saw his shoulders stiffen. "But you lied to me, Finn, and you let your sister lie," he covered his face with his hands again and started rocking a little, "and you stood back and you let your sister get punished for something that was really your fault, didn't you. You hurt our people and you hurt me and you nearly hurt yourself and your sister, and then you lied about it instead of taking responsibility."

"I'm...sorry," he whispered. Then he burst out earnestly, "I thought maybe we could get some food and bring it to the caves, I, I think, we'd still have some food left if it's in the cave with us instead of where all the dragons--"

"It's been tried before, Finn. The dragons found the food; children were slaughtered. It was years before the dragons gave up on the caves and they were safe to hide in again."

Finn hung his head. "...I'm sorry."

"I'm glad you are. I hope you'll never lie to me again." She started to pull him facedown over her lap.

"No!" he cried in a panic, struggling. She winced in pain as the effort of holding him still made her burns throb. "I won't do it again, I promise, I'm sorry, I'm sorry--!"

She had actually only ever spanked him once, and he'd hated it so much that the simple threat of it happening again had always been enough to keep him in line until now. "Stop that. The more you struggle, the worse it will be."

He screamed as she spanked him. It was more out of horror than pain; she knew that it hurt, but not that much. Still, Valka came bursting out of the bedroom as if her brother was being murdered. "LET GO OF HIM! YOU'RE NOT ALLOWED TO DO THAT TO HIM, YOU'RE NOT ALLOWED--!"

"Valka, get back in the bedroom."
Val flung herself over Finn and glared up at their mother.

"Valka, I'm glad that you want to protect your brother, but this is not--"

"I told you it was MY FAULT," she snarled. "Not Finn's! You can't punish him, you have to punish me because it was my fault!"

Astrid's fingers clenched, and she forced herself to breathe slowly and deeply until she had calmed down. Her voice was even again as she said, "Finn, make a choice. Tell your sister to go back and take her punishment, and you take yours. Or else I'll spank Valka and lock her up, then finish spanking you and ground you, too."

Valka screamed furiously and hit her mother. Her fist happened to glance off one of the burns; seeing how much it hurt Astrid, Valka viciously focused her attack, and Astrid snatched both the little girl's arms, squeezing tightly and trembling with the effort of staying still and not lashing out. Mother and daughter glared fiercely at each other for a long moment.

'...Hiccup,' Astrid managed to remember, tears stinging her eyes from the pain of her wounds. 'I will not be the monster Hiccup thought I was. No matter what this child does to me, she is still a child and I am her mother and I am the one in charge. I will not let her control me, I will not let my actions be dictated by the pain and anger she caused me.' She took a deep breath and relaxed her grip a little. "Go back to the room, Valka."

"NO! I HATE YOU!"

"Go, Valka," Finn whispered.

His sister stared at him, looking betrayed.

Huddled on the floor, Finn stared back at her with tears running down his face. "I don't want you and Mommy to be mad at each other. Go be grounded."

Valka burst into tears, jerked away, and fled back into the bedroom.
Astrid exhaled in relief and caught herself just in time from thanking her young son. "Good job, Finn," she said instead. "Come back and get this over with so you won't have to worry about it anymore."

Miserable but resigned now, he allowed himself to be pulled back over her lap, and cried softly as she finishedspanking him. Then she just held him for a long time as he buried his face against her.

"Finn," she finally murmured, "I love you."

"Really?" he choked out.

It broke her heart how desperate he sounded. "Yes, Finn. Yes, of course." She tugged him back so she could cup his face in both hands and look into his eyes. "It's okay to make mistakes, sweetheart. Sometimes I make mistakes, too. Everyone does. But even if you do bad things sometimes, you don't have to be a bad person. You remember the bad things you did so that you won't do them anymore. You try your best and be brave so that you can be proud of yourself again."

"I'm not brave," he whispered. "Valka's brave, not me."

"You know...Valka's braver than you are about some things, but I think you're braver than her about other things."

He looked at her hopefully.

"Each of you is good at different things, and that's okay."

"I miss Valka," he whispered.

She hugged him again. "I'm sorry that punishing her means that you don't get to see her, either."

"I'm sorry I hurt you," he whispered, gently tracing the edge of a bandage.
"I'll heal. I'm all right. My children are alive and unhurt, that's all that matters."

"But we lost so much food, and it's all my fault...."

"...Yes, but I'm not angry at you, Finn. What you did was terrible, but we're just going to have to make the best of it. We're Vikings, we can handle setbacks."

He sniffled. She kissed him and set him down, then went to put a piece of bread and a handful of nuts in a bowl. She set it down on the table and called Finn. "Come eat your supper."

He trudged over to her, but balked at actually eating. "I'm not hungry, Mommy."

She gave him a hard look. Everyone was hungry all the time now. "Are you lying to me again, Finn?"

"No," he gasped. "I mean, yes, yes, I told you a lie, please don't spank me again--"

"I won't. But don't lie to me again."

"I'm sorry--"

"Sit down and eat your food."

"...I don't want to," he whispered.

"Why not?" she said in exasperation, puzzled that he seemed genuinely remorseful about his refusal rather than defiant.

He stared at her as if he couldn't understand why she didn't understand. "It's my fault we lost food. I'm not allowed to eat."
"Finn, no. You're still a little boy and you already don't get enough to eat. This isn't enough for you, either, but it's all I have. Sit down and eat."

"Please, Mommy," he begged. "Please, no."

"...All right, don't eat the bread. But I'm your mother and your chief, Finn, and I'm ordering you to eat the rest of it."

There was a long pause. Then, slowly, he climbed into the chair and started to sit down, sucked in a breath, knelt on the chair instead, and ate his pitiful supper one piece at a time.

Astrid took the bread and another handful of nuts to her bedroom. When she opened the door, she found Valka standing in the middle of a disaster - blankets ripped off the bed and now covered with stains, stuffing pulled out of the pillow, clothes strewn everywhere, thrown things, smashed things....

Astrid stormed toward her daughter. Valka's expression instantly turned from defiance to terror, and she bolted. Astrid caught her, Valka screamed and struggled, Astrid gripped her tightly but then paused. I need to try something different. This was not the first time Valka had been purposely destructive, but no matter how much she was spanked as a result, she kept doing it every time she wanted revenge. Corporal punishment, so effective and therefore rarely used on Finn, obviously didn't work for Valka. She's so scared. Why does she do this when she knows she'll get in trouble and is so afraid of it?!

"I HATE YOU MOMMY I HATE YOU I HATE YOU--!"

'Unless she's afraid of me, not the punishment.' Astrid wrapped her arms around her daughter and hugged her. "I love you, Val," she whispered.

Valka went silent and rigid.

"You hurt me and confuse me and frustrate me...but you're my daughter, and I love you. I love you no matter what you do."

"I messed up all your stuff," Valka said shakily.
"Yes. You're going to have to clean it all up."

Valka burst into tears. "And then I get punished because I'm a bad girl."

Astrid looked her in the face and said firmly, "You are not a bad girl. You're a good girl, who makes good and bad decisions, just like everyone else."

"Don't yell at me, Mommy," Valka sobbed, "Don't yell at me, don't get mad at me, don't hate me...don't lock me up all alone, I hate it so much..."

"I love you. I love you. I love you." Once Valka had been comforted, Astrid was shocked at how eager she was to clean up the mess, and that she apologized sincerely and without any prompting.

"I'm really sorry, Mommy! I won't ever do it again. I'll do it every time I'm bad, but if you don't ground me then I won't be bad, okay? I promise~"

Astrid sighed a little. "I hope not. Here, Val, eat your supper."

"Can I go talk to Finn?"

"...Tomorrow. Right now, eat your supper and then go to sleep."

Valka started crying. "Mommy, I don't want to be grounded, I want to go see Finn--!"

"I know I overdid it, so you're only grounded until tomorrow morning instead of ten days, but you need to learn how to control yourself, Valka."

"I'll be bad!" Valka screamed, "I'll be so bad, and I hate you and I--! NO, MOMMY!"

But Astrid, though her grip was firm, was not rough or violent; she simply held the little girl so Val couldn't run to the door. She sat down and held her daughter and determined that she would sit there all night if she had to, but she was not going to respond to the kicking and screaming and vitriol this time.
"I HATE YOU, MOMMY, I HATE YOU! I HATE YOU...!" Then, after a lot of wordless crying, "I want...to see...Finn...!"

"Tomorrow, sweetheart."

Valka burrowed into her mother and cried and, to Astrid's surprise, soon fell asleep. Astrid hesitated for a while, then put her daughter to bed and went out to find Finn curled up by the fire, drawing sadly. "Come on, sweetie, you're going to have to sleep upstairs tonight." The twins were still too young to sleep in the loft very often, but it had slowly started being furnished as they began using it as a playroom during the day.

"By myself?" he asked anxiously.

Astrid hesitated. She didn't want to leave her timid little son alone all night, but if she slept with him, then that would mean abandoning Valka. Finn would survive a lonely night, but Val would completely panic if she woke up and found herself alone in the darkness. "Not all by yourself - you'll have Spike, won't you?" Astrid said encouragingly. Finn clutched his stuffed Nadder tighter. Astrid still thought that a dragon toy was inappropriate, but she had thought of a way to spin it for Finn, claiming that his little dragon companion would have a better chance of protecting him from the more murderous members of its kind.

"I'd rather have you and Val," he said in a low voice.

Astrid picked him up and carried him upstairs, soothing him all the way. "I know, but you're a very brave boy, Finn, and I know you can handle a night with just you and Spike."

"I'm brave...?"

"You remember how I said that Val is brave about some things and you are brave about other things? Think about how poor Val would feel if she woke up all alone. You can be brave enough to let me stay with your sister and comfort her if she needs it, right? You and Spike can do it, I know you can."

He sniffled and clung to her. She laid him in his father's old bed and tucked the blankets close around him and told him a bedtime story to help him relax, an adventure with him and Spike as if Spike was a real dragon. "...and then Spike whipped his tail, whoosh! And a whole row of spikes
flew straight into the shadow monster so that it disappeared, poof! And was never seen again. And then Spike nuzzled his friend and Finn patted his head, and Finn climbed on his back and awaaaay they both flew, over the fluffy white clouds to where the sunbeams stretched toward the horizon...."  

When Finn was asleep, Astrid kissed his forehead tenderly, leaving with great reluctance so she could return to her troubled little daughter.

_To be continued...._

**Author's Notes:** Yeah, I see "it;" I'll fix it in the final draft. X'D

Ftr, this story is not the first one I have written with Finn & Valka (a.k.a. Storm). They also appeared in my one-shot _Name Change_, as well as an outtake one-shot called "Hide." (If you're on AO3 or FFN, you can find both of those in "Two Worlds, One Family." ) Both of those fics have a different setup where HiccStrid are genuinely in love and got married soon after HTTYD1.
Hiccup had been doing this for over a year now, so it was routine enough that he no longer feared going up 'alone' against Drago Bludvist's forces. He never felt alone anymore. Hiccup might have been the only human standing up to the cruel conqueror, but he always rode into battle with Toothless, his best friend and partner, and he trusted his flockmates with all his heart. He knew how to utilize his own dragon army to the best advantage, he knew how to get in and out quickly, he knew when to be stealthy and when to put on a show, and he knew how to soothe and reassure the wounded, fearful rescues who were brought back to the Sanctuary after every victory.

After getting so familiar with the dragon side of things that he could pull off some missions in his sleep, he was also starting to get familiar with the enemy.

"TAKE 'EM DOWN, LADS!"

Hiccup couldn't help smiling a little behind his helmet. He knew that voice, and it didn't take him long to locate boastful, determined Eret Eretson barking orders from the deck of his ship. "When are you going to learn, Eret-son-of-Eret?" Hiccup murmured almost affectionately.

"Your Night Fury is mine, dragon rider!"

"Not today, Captain," Hiccup called back cheerfully. He signaled the troop of dragons behind him to go into one of their practiced maneuvers and then abruptly dive-bombed the ship. He and Toothless avoided the flying net with a well-timed spin; Eret shrieked and dove out of the way as Toothless came plunging straight toward him. The Night Fury pulled up at the last second, smugly coughing out a fireball as he did so.

"GET THAT NIGHT FURY!" Eret shouted, but his crew had more pressing problems.

"Boss! The ship's on fire!"

"You men stay on the port side launchers; Pintel, Ragetti, you two--!"
There was a series of explosions by the dragon cages.

"NO!" Eret cried. "NO!"

Freed dragons came soaring out of the smoke; a moment later, a dragon too weak to fly was lifted into the air by one of the Sanctuary dragons.

"DON'T LET THEM ESCAPE!"

"Boss! Now the ship's really on fire!"

"Boss, I can't swim! I can't swim! We're going down, I can't swim, I'll drown!"

Eret cursed and gave orders for the life boats to be launched. Then he stood with his fists clenched on the railing of his burning ship and glared after the retreating dragons, his eyes full of fury and despair.

---

Valka kind of liked Snotlout, because he always smiled at her and called her a princess and talked as if he was the best thing in the world, but then did dumb stuff so she knew that she was still the best thing in the world.

She liked him, but she knew her mother didn't really. Her mother had taught her how to respond if people ever said certain bad things. Valka was four years old the first time Snotlout told her a bad thing, but it was okay because she knew exactly what to do.

"Heeeeyyy, it's my princess! And how are you this lovely morning?"

"I'm GOOD!" Valka announced cheerfully.
"Awesome! Wanna make sure my girl's always got things going her way."

"I'm not your girl," she corrected him.

"Heh." He glanced around, then knelt down to her level said in a quiet, conspiratorial way, "Want me to tell you a secret?"

"Oooohhh, yes!"

"Well. The secret is: you actually are my girl, Valka!"

"No, I'm not," she said matter-of-factly.

"Sure you are! I'll tell you something, I know your mom always says you're that dragon-loving traitor's daughter, but don't listen to her, Val. Truth is, you're my daughter." The teasing look dropped from his face and he started to say ruefully, "That is, you'd be my daughter if--" He didn't get to finish.

Valka recognized those words! They were bad words! Delighted at the opportunity, the little girl swung a solid kick into Snotlout's crotch.

"AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!"

Valka giggled, watching him rolling around on the ground cradling his boy-parts. "You said it! You said it, so I got to do it, yaaay, that was fun!"

"Valkaaaaa," he wailed when he could speak again, "whyyyyyy did you do thaaaaat...?"

"Mama said, 'If that no-good Snotlout ever tells you he's your father, kick him in the nuts,'" Valka recited. She pointed. "Those are your nuts, right there! I kicked you there!"

"Yeah...yeah, you did, thanks...."
"Are you crying?" she asked interestedly.

"Yeeeesssss...." He grinned through his tears. "Wow. Four years old, and my girl already knows how to take a guy down."

"I'm not your girl!" she crowed triumphantly. "I get to kick you again!"

"No!" he shrieked, curling into a tighter ball. "Aha...okay, look, you're my niece. Sort of. So you're my girl niece, okay?"

She thought about this. "Okay. And you're my fake daddy."

"Fake daddy...." He uncurled a little to smile. "Well, it has 'daddy' in there! I'll take it!"

"Good job, Fake Daddy!" Valka held up her hand for a high five, which Snotlout weakly returned, then continued on her merry way to find a frog to drop down Finn's shirt.

"Good job, Val...ow...ooooowww...yep, Hofferson's daughter all right...."

o.o.o.o.o

"Is it just me, or is Eret-son-of-Eret no fun anymore?" Hiccup mused. He swung back for another attack.

Ten minutes later, the rest of the flock were retreating with the freed captives, and Drago's men were racing around the ruined fort in noisy chaos. Hiccup, lingering behind to make sure all the dragons were accounted for, hesitated when he saw Eret watching him.

"Rider."

Eret looked so uncharacteristically still and serious that Hiccup saluted in respect.
"Can you...can you get your beast to shoot me?"

Hiccup shoved his helmet up out of his face. "What?" Now that he was paying attention, he realized how completely hopeless Eret looked.

"Look." Eret tugged down his tunic far enough to reveal a huge, ugly brand scarring his chest. Hiccup stared at it in horror. "This is what he did to me the last time you stole my entire shipment and I had nothing to deliver. I'm probably a dead man walking right now, and you won't draw out the torture like he might... And if he thinks I got killed fighting you, he'll send money back home to my people."

Hiccup had no words. All this time, he had been so focused on the dragons, he hadn't even thought of the human beings in Bludvist's employ. He hadn't ever considered that they probably had loved ones of their own, that their war against the dragons might not be personal; he hadn't ever expected to see Eret Eretson, always a source of half-competent amusement, look like he was caught in a trap every bit as cruel and inescapable as the ones he used to cage dragons.

Hiccup gritted his teeth and silently signaled for Toothless to take flight.

Eret closed his eyes and drew his sword, holding it in a half-hearted show of fighting back in case any of the men still running around happened to notice him. Toothless pounced. Eret braced himself.

There was no pain, just a sudden surge of...nausea. And disorientation. And--
"AAAAAAAAHHH!"

Hiccup laughed.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!" Eret shrieked, struggling in Toothless's claws as they rapidly ascended.

"Don't worry, your abduction flight will be a lot shorter than mine was," Hiccup called down to his captive.
Eret had gone quiet by the time they reached the Sanctuary. Hiccup didn't want to bring the hostile stranger right into the heart of his peaceful home, so he had Toothless drop off the trapper in one of the outlying caves. Hiccup dismounted as Eret rolled to his feet and burst upright, wild-eyed. His main weapon was gone, so Eret drew a small knife and glared, his body coiled in a fighting stance.

Hiccup glanced at one of the curious flockmates behind the man. "Blade-arm, bite, GENTLE," he instructed in the dragons' language.

"Listen to me," Eret started, "if you think you--" He choked off when a Snafflefang's jaws closed on his arm. The trapper was caught, rigid, staring at the dragon in horror, the knife still gripped tightly but now held immobile. Blood started trickling down his arm.

"Sorry," Hiccup fake-apologized. "I told him to be gentle, but he has a grudge, you see. Don't worry, it'll heal well. If he decides to let you go without ripping off your whole arm first."

Eret swallowed. More and more dragons were gathering, curiously watching the drama unfold between the two humans.

"Drop the knife, please."

Eret closed his eyes, then reluctantly peeled his fingers away from the hilt and let it fall to the floor. Hiccup ambled over, picked up the knife, and slipped it into his own inventory. "Smart choice."

Then, to the dragon, "Release."

Reluctantly, the dragon opened his jaws and backed away. Eret clutched at the slightly bloody bite mark on his arm and scrambled around, seeing with horror how many dragons surrounded him. A few were approaching to investigate him now that his blade was gone. "No! Stay away! Stay away!"

Hiccup unfastened his pants and started to mark a boundary around Eret with urine.
"What are you DOING???

"Claiming you."

"WHAT?!

Hiccup finished the circle and grinned as he fastened his pants again. "Well, unless you want one of them to claim you. Because someone will, and I think you'd prefer it be me."

Eret stared at him.

"Unless I'm wrong and you do want to belong to a dragon instead," Hiccup allowed.

A couple of dragons had reached the boundary by now and were sniffing at it. Eret let out a little squeaking sound and stood rigid with fear between them. A third dragon came up to join the investigation.

"Hey," Hiccup scolded mildly, "shoo." He flapped his hands at the dragons and then stepped close to Eret, putting his arms around the man and nuzzling him. "My interesting thing."

"Get off of me!" Eret shook him loose and started to run, then shrieked when a dragon eagerly seized the chance to gallop close to him. "AAAHH!" He dodged away and tried to flee again, but there were too many dragons. He changed directions about two or three times before his wild eyes caught sight of Hiccup, who was pointing to the middle of the circle. Eret rushed back toward him. "Keep them away from me!"

"You're going to have to stay right in this spot if you want them to leave you alone."

"What?!"

Hiccup explained with condescending, slightly amused patience, "When you're outside the circle, you are fair game. Anyone can come up and mark you and manhandle you however they want. However, if you stay here, inside the magic pee circle, they'll recognize that you're in my territory and they won't touch you."
Eret stared at him again. "...You are insane."

Hiccup shrugged. "Well, feel free to test it, if you want." He flapped his hand invitingly. "Go on, step outside the circle again."

Breathing hard, Eret stared around at all the dragons, of which there seemed to be more and more with each passing minute. All of them had their eyes fixed on him, but most of them were staying put; only a few were sniffing and testing the boundary.

"Oi," Hiccup scolded again as a dragon, eyeing him, slowly started to reach her paw past the line of urine, "no. MY prisoner. No." Sheepishly, she withdrew her paw and retreated. A few minutes later, the dragons had all settled into a comfortable stalemate, some of them losing interest entirely and trundling away.

There was a distant squawk and a rushing, thumping sort of sound, then yet another dragon came tearing into the cave. Eret flinched, but the newcomer made a beeline for Hiccup, who laughed and threw out his arms in welcome, yet simultaneously cringed away as if bracing for an attack.

The dragon all but bowled him over, flapping her wings in excitement and nipping at him over and over. "Okay, okay! I'm glad to see you, too, baby girl." They nuzzled each other with affection, just as three more dragons approached more sedately. The smallest one sort of wound herself around Hiccup, digging her claws into his leather armor for purchase and nuzzling him. "Hey there, Hen," Hiccup crooned, then reached up to pat the biggest one. "We're back, Cloudjumper. And we brought a friend, heh." The third dragon ambled up to Hiccup, giving him a light, amiable head-butt. "Fiiiiinn," Hiccup sing-songed, scrubbing his fingers over the dragon's head in a rough caress. Finn purred and curled his tail in pleasure.

"Rider," Eret called in a slightly panicky voice, "Rider, your magic pee circle isn't working...!"

"Valka, no," Hiccup ordered sharply. The dragon squawked a protest. "No, honey. That's one's only for me, no one else, okay?"

She huffed, turning away from Eret and coming to collapse at her mother's feet.

"Sorry about that," Hiccup said. "She's my daughter, so she thinks she's more entitled to my stuff than other people are."
"Your...." Eret echoed warily.

"Well, actually, usually she is more entitled to my stuff, but--" Hiccup smiled at the dragon again, scratching the back of her head, "--not this time, sweetie. Sorry."

"Hold on, did you just say your daughter?"

"Yes, her name is Valka. And this is my son, Finn. And my name is Hiccup, by the way, I just realized that I never told you that before."

Eret mouthed wordlessly.

"Finn? Val?" Both dragons perked to attention. "This person here," Hiccup said, gesturing, "his name is Eret. Eret. Him, Eret."

Finn blinked lazily. Valka gurgled a sound that sounded extraordinarily like 'Eret.'

"Did it...just...say my name...?"

"Yes, she just said your name." Hiccup caressed his children fondly. "I have a theory that these two understand Norse better than the others, maybe because they imprinted on me...."

"I think I need to sit down," Eret moaned, and did so.

He stayed in the circle for hours, still amazed that a mere line of urine could keep the whole horde of giant fire-breathing lizards at bay. Only a few of them stayed, lounging around sleepily and not looking threatening at all, but Eret still didn't dare set foot outside the circle. He had a feeling that as soon as he left the safe boundary, the beasts would drop their harmless act and pounce.

He panicked a little when the crazy dragon rider, 'Hiccup,' wandered away, but didn't dare try to follow him. After an agonizing twenty or thirty minutes of wondering if he'd been abandoned for good and calculating his chances to escape, Eret was relieved when Hiccup returned, hauling what
looked like camping supplies and with the same passel of dragons still at his heels. "Figured I'd spend the night here, keep you company," Hiccup explained amiably.

"When are you going to let me go?" Eret demanded.

"You're free to go any time you like."

"Yes, and get eaten! No thanks!"

"They won't eat you, Eret-son-of-Eret." Hiccup finished building up the pile of fuel. "Valka, fire," he instructed. She was the one who enjoyed the task best, and eagerly spat flame onto the kindling.

Eret watched as Hiccup fed the dragons with piles of fish, then speared a few pieces to roast over the fire. The smell of cooking meat made Eret's stomach growl. To his alarm, the sound attracted the dragons' attention. Toothless's plates twitched, Finn and Hen paused to look at the trapper, and Valka curiously trotted over to sniff at him. "Rider! Hiccup!" Eret cried in a panic, edging away. Valka followed him around the circle, apparently finding it to be a fun game.

"She won't hurt you, Eret."

"Get her away from me!"

"Valka, come."

Grumbling, she made a gentle snap at Eret's arm and then turned to obey.

"Eret," Hiccup said encouragingly, "come here and eat."

"I don't know what you're playing at, you dragon lunatic, but you need to call them off now and let me walk out of here with my head and all four limbs intact."

Hiccup spoke as if he hadn't heard. "Doesn't it smell yummy~?" he coaxed, waving a stick full of fish. Valka snatched up a mouthful. "Val!" She squawked in distress and let the stolen morsel drop
out of her mouth. "You knew it was cooked, goofy."

Val trilled plaintively, and Finn made a soft, derisive snort in response.

It was a long time before Eret finally worked up the courage to leave the circle (which had by now completely faded from sight). By then, he was starving, and the dragons all seemed either asleep or close to it. To his dismay, as soon as he set a foot outside what was left of the boundary, most of the dragons raised their heads toward him or at least opened their eyes, and that dratted female Scuttleclaw chirped with interest and headed straight toward him.

"Valka, come here," Hiccup said, to Eret's relief. Val eyed the two humans indecisively until Hiccup held out his hands and wiggled his fingers. Valka tromped back to him and practically threw herself across his lap, purring in contentment as he caressed her.

Eret very cautiously edged toward the fire and picked up one of the remaining skewers. The fish on the end was half-burned and had now gone cold, but it tasted delicious as it made its way down Eret's throat. He moaned a little in relief, then nearly screamed at a faint touch to the back of his head that he realized, to his horror, was a dragon.

"Stay very still, Eret," Hiccup said softly.

Eret was rigid, whimpering under his breath as the dragon nosed at him.

"He's just checking you out, calm down."

"Get...this...thing...away...from...me...!"

"He is very much scared," the Rumblehorn observed.

"Thinks he's prey," Hiccup explained.

"This bad thing, I will punish him?" Skullcrusher considered. Most dragons wouldn't have been able to pick up on enough of the details of Eret's past to hold much of a grudge against him, but to the exquisite nose of a Rumblehorn, the traces of dragon fear and dragon blood clinging to Eret's body
"Already punished." Hiccup approached and, ignoring Eret's protests, tugged down his tunic to indicate the brand. "Hurt."

Skullcrusher acknowledged the burned flesh and settled back.

"Get off me!"

Hiccup retreated and settled down comfortably with Hen and Valka. "You don't answer to Drago anymore, Eret. This is your chance to make a fresh start."

"Are you delusional?" Eret said in disgust. "That man is well on his way to taking all your pets and ruling the world. Crossing him means paying for it sooner or later."

"So you really think we don't have a chance?" Hiccup said idly. "You've seen His Majesty, haven't you?"

"His Ma--?" Eret broke off, realizing whom Hiccup was referring to. "Where is your monster king?" he asked warily.

"Right here."

"What?!"

Hiccup tapped the side of his head. "Talking to me. Listening to you."

Eret paled and started to edge away.

"Nothing supernatural," Hiccup laughed. "He's just...big. His mind is so huge, he can't help spilling over into our tiny little thoughts. He's supposed to. How else could he run a huge dragon flock?"
Eret swallowed and asked weakly, "He's watching us? Right now?"

"I'll take you to meet him tomorrow. He really wants to see you in person."

"No. No, you need to let me go, I have to get back to the fleet, you don't understand, I've been away too long already...!"

"Relax, Eret," Hiccup said quietly. "Drago can never get to you here."

To be continued....
Eret barely slept, especially since one dragon or another always seemed to be watching him whenever he opened his eyes. When the sun rose, he felt even more exhausted and stressed than he had the evening before, and it certainly didn't help when Hiccup chirped out an order and dragons started converging on Eret. "No-- No! Get back! Hiccup! Hiccup--!"

"You're fine, Eret," Hiccup said, not even bothering to glance back as he disappeared into the depths of the caves.

Dragons herded Eret after him until Eret was practically running, less to keep up with Hiccup and more to keep out of reach of the creatures behind him. He burst out into a sudden blaze of sunlight, shielding his eyes and wondering miserably what new horrors were awaiting him.

Several minutes after his eyes adjusted, Eret was still standing there, staring, open-mouthed. He had never seen so many dragons before in his life...and he had also rarely seen anything more beautiful in his life. He had never expected to find himself experiencing those two things at the same moment.

After a while, Hiccup approached and gently touched his arm. "Follow me," he murmured. Eret drifted after him in a wordless daze, snapping out of it only when he saw the king.

Eret had seen the dragon alpha before, an enormous creature rearing up out of the sea like a destruction-spewing mountain. He'd seen the great beast raging, roaring, flashing its fangs and destroying ships with a single sweep of its tail.

He had never seen the king at rest, reigning in his own beautiful domain, watching over the comparatively tiny dragons bowing to him and romping across his body.

"Alpha," Hiccup called, bowing.

Great aquamarine eyes turned to him. "Hiccup." Amusement wafted into Hiccup's mind. "You have brought your captured thing to show me?"
"Be gentle with him, he's frightened," Hiccup said, not without his own amusement. He knew exactly how Eret felt. He also now knew how the alpha had felt, compassionate and protective toward a terrified, helpless, lonely creature.

The dragon trapper was on his knees, not in obeisance but simply because he was too weak with hopeless awe to keep standing. "Hiccup," he said faintly at the approach of those enormous jaws, but like Hiccup before him in the face of such overwhelming power, he had no will to resist as he was consumed.

His alarm and physical discomfort was immediately swept away by a firm pressing against his mind, as if something...someone...was demanding to be granted access to his inner self. Eret was terrified. For all his cocky bravado, he had always been intimidated by those much stronger than him, and he gave way almost immediately. For a split second, he expected to be torn apart mentally as well as physically, but instead, he was filled with a strong pulse of righteous anger, of grief and remembered shock and a demand for him to account for himself: "Why?"

The dragon knew. Eret felt as if the king somehow knew everything he had ever done, every cruelty he had ever committed, every moment he had ever shamed himself or betrayed those he cared about.

Trembling, he completely surrendered, subconsciously condemning himself as a creature too vile and worthless to live, but that was not what the king sought. There was a sense of impatience and frustration. "No. These broken humans, they make themselves nothing...! You, 'Eret,' this sound-name for you, one who hurts and enslaves my little ones. WHY?"

Eret had never thought of it as slavery before. He had never thought of himself as being enslaved before, until he sensed the anguish of Drago's captives and realized it was exactly how he himself felt. "Enslaved, owns me, subdues me, hurts me, trapped, never escape, never escape, never escape...!"

"How does he catch you and hold you without chains? Why does he hurt you his own flockling??"

For some reason, Eret found himself thinking of the brand on his chest. There was a pause, as he sensed the king absorbing this and all it entailed. Punishment, domination, ownership, cruelty, pain....
"This terrible thing, this 'brand,'" and then for some reason the king was thinking of Hiccup, screaming, flesh on fire. Eret was astonished to 'see' such a thing, as if Hiccup had been juxtaposed into Eret's own memory of the branding.

"Hiccup doesn't have a brand! He was never Drago's."

"Humans, these cruel human monster-queens, they torture their own flocklings and tear their hearts to pieces...."

Eret sensed movement, and panicked until he realized he was being released. Squeezing his eyes shut against the sunlight, he shivered uncontrollably and flinched when he felt a human arm curl around his shoulders. "You're okay," Hiccup murmured. Eret had a hand pressed to his face, but couldn't stop the sounds he was making, sniffling like a child, he wanted to hide until he could get control of himself again....

But Hiccup had no scorn for those tears. He said nothing derisive as he helped Eret to his feet, did not mock or even tease him. "The first time's the worst, it'll get better the more you talk to him. You can lie down in here, and later I'll show you where you can wash up. There's actually some hot springs here, believe it or not...."

Eret barely heard him. Exhausted from the sleepless night and from the encounter with the king, he slept like the dead for several hours.

When he awakened, he found himself alone except for the Rumblehorn, who pinned him with a direct stare as soon as Eret shifted. The trapper stared back for a few seconds, then sighed, finished extricating himself from the furs he'd been wrapped in, and ventured toward the mouth of the cave.

There was no sign of Hiccup or his entourage, but the dragons were still out there, flying and frolicking in their sanctuary. The king was still there, too, though far away, grumbling at a cluster of agitated dragons halfway across the nest.

Eret wasn't sure he quite dared to set foot outside the safety of the cave, but he was so hungry. He eyed the Rumblehorn, who was accompanying him like a prison guard. "Food," Eret tried, not having much hope of success. "I'm hungry." He pantomimed it. "You have anything for me to eat? Fish, seal, whale?" He sighed. "I haven't eaten in so long, I can't even remember-- What are you doing?!"
The dragon's eyes had rolled back and it was making a huffing, hacking sort of noise. Just when Eret wondered if it was about to keel over dead, the dragon expelled a portion of saliva-covered fish at the man's feet.

Eret stared at it, trying not to throw up.

After a while, the dragon nosed the vomited-up fish closer in Eret's direction and barked.

Eret backed away.

The dragon growled.

Eret whimpered and wished he'd never brought up the subject of food at all.

Just then, Hiccup came swooping up on the back of his Night Fury, with the small dragon and the two Scuttleclaws alighting around him. "Good to see you awake," he greeted.

"He threw up at me!"

Hiccup laughed. "Lunch. Eat up, Eret."

"Are you crazy?!"

"He's hungry," Skullcrusher complained to Hiccup, "but he won't eat, this crazy human!"

After Hiccup had soothingly explained the situation to Skullcrusher, and after he had forced Eret to take a single bite so as not to be horrendously rude, and after Valka had eagerly descended on the remaining portion and Finn had snapped it up right from under her nose and Valka had screeched and attacked him and Finn had successfully fended her off, Hiccup procured some human food for Eret, which the trapper gratefully devoured.

To be continued....
Eret subplot, part 3

Carried Off, a DreamWorks' How to Train Your Dragon fanfic by Raberba girl

Eret subplot, part 3 (rough draft)

It took a few days for Eret to feel decently relaxed around the dragons, and many more for Hiccup to trust him - there were always at least two or three guards around, sometimes unnoticed by their charge but always keeping an eye on the (former?) trapper.

"So how long are you planning on holding me prisoner?" Eret said one night as they sat around a fire, eating supper. He was comfortable enough by now to be able to mention it as a joke, though he genuinely wanted to know the answer.

"I dunno," Hiccup said amiably. "How long are you planning on hurting my friends the minute we let you go?"

Eret paused, and Hiccup watched him. After a while, Eret said slowly, "It's not...really about dragons, I guess."

"Has it ever *not* been about dragons?" Hiccup snapped.

"Hiccup," Eret said, seriously enough that Hiccup met his eyes. "It's *never* been about dragons." Hiccup frowned in confusion. "Haven't I been telling you all this time? It's Drago. Everything always boils down to him."

"He's a monster," Hiccup said tightly, taking another bite more forcefully than was necessary.

"You say that because you're so besotted with your flock here, but--" Eret blinked. "Well, how *did* you come to oppose Drago's army, anyway?"

"Found out he was the one hiring all those trappers. Tracked him down, started freeing his captives."
"But-- You mean he never came to your hometown?"

Hiccup stared.

Eret stared back. "Do you...even have a hometown? How'd a Viking like you end up living in a dragon nest, anyway?"

Valka was drowsing and the other dragons couldn't follow the human conversation, but Finn shifted, suddenly alert as he listened.

Hiccup hesitated, considering how much to tell Eret. "I was exiled."

Eret's eyes widened.

"Unfairly."

"What is that sound?" Finn asked, imitating the word as best he could.

"'Exile' means my human pack rejected me, cast me out."

Finn moved closer, preening Hiccup's hair and pressing against him to express possessiveness and comfort.

"It's okay. My good dragon flock is much better than that human pack."

Eret, impatiently waiting through the dragon conversation, asked for clarification as soon as there was an opening.

"I'm no criminal. All I did was refuse to kill dragons, so my village kicked me out. Dragons saved my life."
"How did you...decide not to kill them in the first place?" Eret said wonderingly.

Hiccup smiled a little and roughly caressed Toothless, who rumbled in pleasure as he lay beside his human. "This guy kidnapped me. Brought me here and didn't eat me. Eventually I figured out that no one in this whole nest was planning to eat me, which means...." He met Eret's eyes again. "Which means that there's something wrong out there. These are real dragons. The ones out there, attacking humans.... I can't be sure, but my theory is that they're under the control of their own king, a leviathan who's much less benevolent than His Majesty."

Eret was quiet for a while, processing this.

"Say it right," Finn demanded, very interested in the conversation but having difficulty following it.

"This our flock is very good. Other dragons, foreign, other flocks.... Something wrong, bad. Hurt us. I think maybe their alpha is rotten," Hiccup translated. Finn growled softly.

"That would explain a lot," Eret mused. "The dragons here aren't anything like the ones I'm used to."

"Same here. My village was on the front lines of the dragon war - it seemed like every year got worse and worse; less food, more desperation, more suffering, more people dying...." He was quiet for a moment. "I'm so glad to have escaped all that, but I...worry about the ones I left behind." Finn watched him intently.

"You have family back there?" Eret murmured.

Hiccup closed his eyes. "Not much...just...my mentor and...." He expelled a resigned breath. "A couple of children." He didn't notice Eret rest his head against his hand as if reliving his own memories. "A boy and a girl, twins...they were just babies when I was thrown out...." He rubbed at his eyes. "They're probably dead by now. Even if I could figure out some way to survive going back, I'm...too scared. To find out for sure."

"At least you can pretend they're still alive," Eret mumbled.

Hiccup looked at him for a long moment. "You can't, huh."
"I watched them die," Eret managed to say. He abruptly stood and walked away.

After a while, Finn asked, "Babies? Clutchmates??"

Hiccup reached out and held him. He explained mostly in human speech, though with some dragon language thrown in for clarification and emphasis. "In the past, in my old pack, I had human babies, Finn and Valka, my precious things."

"WE'RE 'Finn' and 'Valka.'" The names were mangled in Finn's dragon voice, but still recognizable to Hiccup, who'd developed an ear for his hatchlings' attempts at human speech.

Hiccup smiled through his grief. "My human babies, my two cubs, Finn and Valka. I lost them, so I was very, very, very sad. My heart hurt, like it was bleeding. But then my two dragon babies came to me, and I said, 'This is my Finn and Valka.' My Finn and Valka babies are not lost anymore, because now they are dragons and they're here with me."

Finn studied him dubiously. "Wrong. Heart still hurts."

"Yes, but only a little. In the past, it used to be very painful. I lost my human Finn and Valka, and it hurt very much. But now I have my dragon Finn and Valka, so I'm better now. It only hurts a little bit."

Finn preened him again.

The subject came up again a few days later. They had originally set out for a recreational flight, but now Hiccup and his troop, along with Eret and Skullcrusher, were hiding behind an iceberg as they watched a ship that had wandered too close to the alpha's territory.

"Is it one of Drago's?" Hiccup asked.

"Yes," Eret said tightly.
"We're wrecking it."

"No!"

Hiccup gave him a hard look. "Why not?"

"It's not a scouting ship. They just got off course; they'll right themselves soon. They won't get anywhere near your dragons, it's not worth the risk of alerting Drago just to sink one ship."

"What about the dragons who are being held captive on that ship?" Hiccup challenged.

Eret's fists clenched. "Do you have any idea what Drago will do if he catches you? Trust me, you'll wish you'd gotten off with just a brand."

Hiccup sighed.

"Do you have any idea what Drago will do if he-- When he finally tracks down that Sanctuary of yours?"

"I'm still not actually sure why you're so afraid of him, even after what I've shown you. Haven't you noticed that he's smaller than one of His Majesty's toenails?"

"You've never seen him subdue a dragon twice his size through sheer intimidation! And you-- He-- There's something, I haven't seen it yet because I'm always out trapping, but he's got something that can bring whole cities under his heel in a single day--"

"Stop panicking. It's just hearsay, rumors growing in exaggeration with each retelling. Everyone thinks he has more power than he actually does."

"You really are going to get yourself killed someday," Eret said in frustration.

"Eret, I don't have time to argue with you. Stay here with Hen and the kids, we'll be back before Val even gets bored."
Eret made a frustrated noise, then jostled with the Scuttleclaws for a good view as they all watched Hiccup set out with Toothless and Cloudjumper. The dragons started blasting the ship, and Hiccup eventually disappeared from sight. What followed were several tense minutes as the Scuttleclaws jabbered at each other in excitement and growing worry. More fires, more shouting men, more smoke.... Then a burst of dragons came pouring into the sky, quickly rounded up and led away by Cloudjumper. Eret and the twins were craning, staring, anxiety rising.

Then Hen made a happy clucking sound, there was a soft thump on the ice behind them, and a slightly winded but very cheerful voice said, "Piece of cake."

Eret went limp with unhappy relief, and the twins swarmed their mother. Hiccup petted them, laughing, then threw a grin over at Eret. "Your luck won't hold out forever," Eret said sourly.

"Let's go."

Once they were home, they settled down for a meal, but Eret was still clearly sulking. Hiccup finally threw a piece of food at him to get his attention, and kept his expression neutral when Eret glared. "I'm sorry. I've never been good at being careful, but I'll try. And I won't make you go near Drago's ships again."

"I'm not a coward."

"...You kind of are," Hiccup said, so sheepishly that it took the edge off.

Eret found himself clenching his jaw. Finally he burst out, "It's like we're all just pawns in a giants' game, and Drago's the only human who knows how to play."

"Hm?"

Eret looked exasperated and swept out a hand. "You said there's another monster out there, who's making the dragons attack us. So that giant is stirring up the whole war to exterminate us, your giant is collecting all the quote-unquote 'good' dragons here in this hidey-hole, and Drago's the only human with the balls to care about his own people caught in the middle."
"I'm don't really understand what you're talking about, but I'm fairly sure you're insulting me."

"I am! Fine, you're on the side of the dragons who aren't killing us; but don't you even care about your own people?"

"Frankly, no."

Eret stared at him.

Hiccup tried hard to keep his voice calm. "I never knew my mother. My father did his best, but I was never more than a disappointment and a hindrance to him, and then he died. Every single person in my own village hated me, kept expecting me to die, and wished I would just disappear. My mentor was the only one who thought I was good for anything, and even he thought I was a failure. My wife... Let's just say that I can't decide which one I hate more, her or Drago Bludvist. My children were the only humans who ever loved me - though they were still babies when I lost them, so maybe it was just that they needed me. They'd probably have hated me, too, once they were older...."

"...So you don't think any human beings are worth fighting for?"

"I think if I have to choose who to protect, the people who hate me or the people who love me, it's a no-brainer."

Eret restlessly ran a hand through his hair. "Then I guess you don't understand, but for the rest of us.... What were we supposed to do, when Drago Bludvist showed up with his fleet and his dragon servants, and rescued us from the monsters? He gave us food and rebuilt our towns, of course we thought of him as a savior. We were happy to join his cause. And even later, when he proved what a beast he is.... We still had no choice. Serve him, or starve to death; serve him, or burn. You say you hated everyone in your village except your children, but are you fine with them growing up under Drago's rule?"

"No one in my village is under Drago's rule."

Eret gave him a disbelieving look.

"I'd never seen or heard of Drago Bludvist until long after I came to the Sanctuary. We'd never
heard of him back on Berk."

"...Okay, you're kind of creeping me out. You'd never heard of Drago Bludvist back in your
hometown?"

"Nope." Then Hiccup frowned. "Is he expanding his territory?"

"Where is your village?"

"Twelve days north of Hopeless and a few degrees south of Freezing-To-Death...."

"What?"

Hiccup shook his head and told him the real coordinates.

"Well, if he hasn't reached that far yet, he will eventually."

Hiccup rose to his feet and started pacing. His agitation caught Toothless's attention, and the Night
Fury hurried to his side. "What happened?"

"Worried for my babies, worried for my babies, worried for my babies...!"

"Babies are fine."

"Dragon babies are fine. Human babies, my cubs, they are in danger?! They are safe?! Maybe,
maybe not, I am worried anxious frustrated...!"

Feeling helpless, Toothless finally turned to Eret and growled. The man scooted back nervously.

Hiccup whirled on him. "I can't go back, they'll kill me. But you...."
"No," Eret raised his hands defensively. "I'm done being an errand boy. I'm staying right here with His Majesty!"

"I won't let anyone hurt you," Hiccup said impatiently. "You don't even have to go all the way to Berk, we just have to find Trader Johann. He'll know if Drago's reached the Archipelago or not."

It took another day of arguing before Eret finally agreed to go. He was rather amazed, once they'd flown far enough, to find lands where the people had only heard exaggerated tales of some sort of 'Dragon Master,' and then lands where the people had never heard of Bludvist at all. "I guess your Sanctuary is technically outside the bounds of his territory, and now we're traveling even further...."

"Dragons fly a lot faster than ships can sail, and none of Drago's men use their slaves for transportation. I feel better now, but I'd still like to track down Johann."

They managed to catch the merchant when he was ashore, so Hiccup didn't have to risk showing his face or revealing the dragons. He waited impatiently as Eret slipped into town, wondering if the man would ever come back.

Eret was a couple of hours late, but he did return, to Hiccup's relief. "That man can definitely talk," Eret grumbled.

"Did any of his stories involve the subjugation of helpless Viking villages by a one-armed monster?" Hiccup asked urgently.

Eret smiled a little. "Sounds like Johann's heard a few rumors, but he mostly used them for tale-telling fodder. Drago hasn't reached your lands yet."

Hiccup exhaled the breath he'd been holding.

"You do care a little."

"Just a little," Hiccup admitted grudgingly. "Just about my kids."
Eret said after a pause, "Maybe we could go check on them."

Hiccup was still and silent for a long time, hand over his face, Toothless warbling in concern. "Don't tempt me," Hiccup finally whispered, then swung onto the Night Fury's back and fled.

*To be continued....*
Eret subplot, part 4

Carried Off, a DreamWorks' How to Train Your Dragon fanfic by Raberba girl

Eret subplot, part 4 (rough draft)

It was a long time before the ex-trapper felt comfortable getting near Drago's fleet, but he was very helpful in giving Hiccup inside information and offering feedback on Hiccup's plans. At first, Eret simply discussed things with Hiccup beforehand, and helped if necessary when Hiccup returned.

About a year after Eret's rescue, however, he had become an equal ally in battle. Hiccup had half-expected him to leave the Sanctuary whenever he felt ready to join humankind again, perhaps working to curb Drago's expansion as Hiccup continued his fight on the front lines.

Yet Eret had never left. He treated the dragon king with as much loyal respect and filial affection as Hiccup did; he provided Hiccup with some much-welcomed human company and conversation; he and Skullcrusher were inseparable by now, partners and friends by both human and dragon standards; the former trapper could speak passable Dragonese and was an immense help to Hiccup during raids.

"You take the east side, I'll go west," Hiccup said. No further instructions were needed, because they'd already fine-tuned the plan back at the Sanctuary. Eret saluted and took off; Hiccup commenced his own task with complete trust in his human partner's dependability.

Twenty minutes later, after three captive dragons had been freed and one had been killed and Hiccup had been chased across half the ship, he found himself in the worst predicament he'd ever been in since he'd entered the war with Drago. Toothless lay raging and helpless on the deck, bound beneath a weighted chain net. Hiccup was on his knees, arms gripped by two of Drago's thugs, as Eret, son of Eret smirked down at him with a knife in his hand. Skullcrusher was nowhere in sight. "You're a slippery little eel, aren't you, but your time finally ran out."

Hiccup was too furious to speak.

"Lock him up," Eret ordered, "and keep him away from his dragon. I'll take care of the beast."

Hiccup screamed abuse at him as he was dragged away, but Eret didn't bat an eye. As soon as he was out of sight, the searing betrayal shifted to anxiety as Hiccup thought of Drago's approach, of
Hiccup was thrown into a dragon cage and chained for good measure. As soon as the men left, he examined every inch of his prison, then paced as best he could, thinking wildly, coming up with plan after impossible plan. Part of him wanted him to curl up and cry at the pain of Eret's betrayal; another part of him was threatening to go insane with worry about his beloved Toothless. A much bigger part of him was wanting to tear at the iron cage with his bare hands and scream defiance of his fate to the skies.

He had no idea how long he'd been locked up when he was shocked to see his best friend slithering through the shadows. "Toothless?!"

"Chained my precious thing," Toothless hissed angrily, and shot a couple of bolts at the cage.

"Hurry, Skullcrusher," said a human voice.

Hiccup whirled. "You!" he snarled.

"No time now," Eret said impatiently. "They got suspicious. They might show up any minute."

"What?!

As they spoke, Skullcrusher, whose leg was bleeding, grunted and rammed the cage in the same place Toothless had shot it. Between them, they managed to make a hole big enough for Hiccup to crawl through, after a well-aimed bolt from Toothless had severed the chain binding Hiccup to the bars.

Eret reached down a hand to help Hiccup to his feet, but instead of taking it, the smaller man lunged upward and wrapped his hands around Eret's throat. "No time for this!" Eret choked out, grappling with him.

"You two-faced, son of a--!"

It was a short fight. Hiccup cursed his own body for the millionth time when he found himself in a
restraining hold. He couldn't kick effectively; he tried a sharp backward jerk of his head, but Eret successfully dodged. As much as Hiccup excelled in other areas, physical combat against opponents who were always, always, always bigger and stronger than him had never been his forte.

"Would you listen to me?" Eret snapped, ignoring Toothless's growls. "I saved us back there by pretending to betray you. Unless you want to hang around and get captured again, we have to go now, and you have to stop trying to kill me."

Hiccup seethed, but recognized that this was not the time to demand explanations. He managed to choke out an enraged assent, and didn't resist when Eret released him and hastily tucked up the dangling chains. "We'll have to get these off at home. I'm gonna send off you and Toothless as soon as we get out in the open. Skullcrusher," he said, and pointed to Hiccup and Toothless, "You, with them, go!"

"Stay with you my friend," Skullcrusher stated, as if anything else was not to be considered.

"You, hurt! You go with them; I flee with Cloudjumper, not you. We together at nest."

Skullcrusher growled his displeasure, but Toothless shoved and bit him until he finally agreed.

In the air, Hiccup was too angry to do much more than cling to Toothless and trust the Night Fury to dodge the missiles that were shot after them. His mind was looping continuously through what had happened, going from betrayal to rage to hurt to confusion to rage again....

Skullcrusher was having a hard time keeping up, and roared in relief when Cloudjumper dropped down to join them a few minutes later, Eret on his back. Hiccup started shouting at him to explain, Eret shouted back that he refused to argue while flying, Skullcrusher whined that he wanted his friend/partner with him, Eret crooned back that they could be together later, Cloudjumper admonished the Rumblehorn for not heeding his limits, and Toothless growled at everyone to shut up.

Back at the Sanctuary, Hiccup slipped off Toothless's back, marched straight over to Eret, and tried to punch him. Eret blocked it. "I hate you!"

"Calm down and let me explain."
"I hate you!"

"Or maybe we can get those chains off and then I'll explain."

Hiccup whipped his arm around, trying to lash at Eret. Eret managed to catch the chain before it struck him. Hiccup immediately whipped the other chain around. Eret caught that one, too, then lifted the fistful of chains as high as he could and arched his eyebrow at Hiccup. Hiccup, though weaker, was taller than the other man, and his half-dangling arms made him look like he was awkwardly praying. He glared at Eret.

"They caught me," Eret said. "Skull was injured. What was I supposed to do, announce that I'm a dragon rider when I had no hope of winning? I still dress like them; I still know their lingo; they have no idea how to speak Dragonese. I pretended I was one of them, told Skull to cower, pretended I was the one who'd injured him. I let them separate us for five minutes and made sure I had a key to his cage. I set free Toothless, set free Skull, looked for you, set free a couple more dragons while I was at it, looked for you some more, chatted up some soldiers who were on their way to torture you, pulled the wool over their eyes, managed to get the dragons in alone, then got all of us out. And I blew my cover. Now Drago will know that Eret, son of Eret is still alive, and a dragon rider. I can't ever pull that same trick again."

Hiccup wordlessly wrenched his arms free and marched away to his makeshift forge. He worked in furious silence until the time came when he needed another pair of human hands. Eret, who had treated Skullcrusher's wound and was now waiting in the shadows of the forge, approached and reached in without being asked. The chains finally clanked to the floor and Hiccup leaned back with a sigh, rubbing at his wrists. At long last, he met Eret's eyes. "...Don't ever do that to me again."

"...You were right when you said I'm still a coward," Eret said in a low voice.

Despite himself, Hiccup felt a sudden urge to comfort him, and angrily fought it back. "I still hate you."

"You won't in the morning," Eret said, more hopefully than confidently. "When you've had time to cool down."

"Shut up."

That night, there was no after-dinner conversation or storytelling or music. They ate separately, and
retreated into their respective caves for the night without a word to each other.

In the morning, as Eret was scaling some fish for his breakfast while Skullcrusher enjoyed his share raw, there was the sound of approaching footsteps. The Scuttleclaw twins came rolling past, in the midst of a scuffle. Hiccup sat down beside Eret; Toothless stretched out behind them, resting his head comfortably on Hiccup's leg. "Morning, jerk," Hiccup said in a friendly tone.

Eret smiled in relief. "Good morning."

"I have magnanimously decided to forgive you for yesterday," Hiccup said, laying his own fish over the fire.

"Good. I believe my heroic rescue deserves a thank you as well."

Valka came tromping up, thrusting her face into Eret's neck. "Morning, Val," he greeted, patting her.

"Eret," she squawked happily.

"Thank you," Hiccup murmured.

"Just so you know, I'd rather die than betray you. ...Not just you; I mean, any of them. Any of us." He laid a hand on Skullcrusher's neck and said softly, "This is my home now, and these are my people."

"Beats living and dying for Drago Bludvist, hm?"

"Definitely."

To be continued....
"Finn and the forge" subplot, part 1

Carried Off, a DreamWorks' How to Train Your Dragon fanfic by Raberba girl

"Finn and the forge" subplot, part 1 (rough draft)

When Finn was four years old, he discovered that the forge was a good place.

He had been exploring, trying to stay out of everyone's way, and because the forge was empty, he had ducked into it when a group of men passed too close to him. Finn made himself comfortable under a table in the corner and eventually fell asleep.

When he awakened, he was utterly horrified to realize that the blacksmith had returned. The fearsome old man was grumbling to himself and clanging away at a weapon. Finn, frozen with terror, stayed in his hiding spot until the blacksmith drank too much and fell asleep. Finn finally managed to muster up the courage to creep out and flee home.

Although the blacksmith himself was practically a monster as far as the little boy was concerned, Finn felt rather drawn to the forge. It was dim and cluttered, which made it a good place to hide, and Finn soon realized that as long as he was careful to keep the blacksmith unaware of his presence, the sounds of the old man's work were strangely soothing and made Finn feel safe.

Finn spent hours comfortably curled up in one hiding place or another, looking at books or drawing or practicing his runes or napping or just thinking, idly listening to either the quiet stillness or the sounds of the blacksmith's work.

Gobber stumped or lounged around the shop at random hours, drinking more than working, keeping his curses confined to low mumbles, unrepentant about slacking off because he was the only one in the village who knew how to do this kind of work. He was irreplaceable. He didn't care about the complaints and he didn't care if he ever lost his livelihood, because dying wasn't any worse than living. He did work a little, mostly because drinking and sleeping did have their limits, and he had nothing else to do. He had long ago stopped baby-sitting the twins - he didn't have the energy to keep up with Valka, and Finn was apparently terrified of his gruff demeanor and unkempt looks.

A few weeks after Finn had claimed the forge as his special place, he was relaxed in his hiding spot, drawing, absorbed in his work, when he was shocked to hear his name.
"Oi, Finn."

The little boy froze, staring up at the blacksmith in horror. The man was looking right at him.

"Give me that box, will you?"

"Wh...Wh...?"

"The box, Finn," Gobber snapped. "You're sitting right in front of it, I can't reach it."

Finn was shaking as he slowly looked behind him and realized that he was indeed blocking a box of tools. Whimpering, he pushed the box out into the open like a supplicant trying to appease an angry god.

Gobber scooped up the box, rummaged around in it for a minute, dropped the box onto the table with a heavy thud, then stumped off to resume working.

Finn curled up tightly for a long time, trying very hard to stay silent as he cried. The blacksmith knew he was here, he'd lost his safe place, he could never come here again, he was lost and he had nowhere to go and the blacksmith had SEEN HIM, and...and....

After a while, it finally occurred to Finn that the blacksmith had not actually kicked him out. He hadn't hurt him, either. Cautiously, Finn shifted a tiny bit so he could look at the blacksmith, who was now just sitting on a stool, drinking. The man had found Finn trespassing, but nothing bad had happened. 'He yelled at me...’ But that was only because Finn had been too slow to obey. He knew better for next time now, if the blacksmith wanted something then Finn must obey immediately, and then the blacksmith wouldn't snap at him.

Gobber fell asleep, and Finn fled.

For two days after that, Finn tried to avoid the forge entirely, but it was so awful not having a place to hide. He was trapped and vulnerable out in the open, he couldn't escape his mother if she came along and was unhappy with him, or his sister when she wanted to harass him, adults would scold him for getting in the way, the other children of the village would make fun of him for being weird and small and weak....
In despair, Finn waited until the next time the forge was empty, then he crept into one of his old hiding places and stayed there until he felt better.

The forge was still a good place when it was empty, but now Finn was constantly stressed and anxious, worrying about the blacksmith coming in. The man probably knew he was there, if the man knew he was there then he could drag Finn out and yell at him, there was no telling what the man would do to him or make him do, Finn could still hide here but he was no longer at peace....

Gobber was working as Finn watched him. The man's movements were slow and weary, and finally he gave a great sigh and stopped altogether.

Gobber felt too sick and weak to take a step. "Finn," he called.

The little boy, already tense, went rigid.

"Finn," Gobber snarled, patience immediately evaporating, "get out here."

The boy, his breathing shallow and erratic with fear, edged out into the open and stared up at the blacksmith beseechingly.

Gobber softened a little. "Be a good lad and fetch some more coal, would you?"

"Wh...wh...?"

'WHY is he so afraid of me?' Gobber thought irritably, but forced his voice to stay calm and not spook the child further. "Over there," he said, pointing. "Put some coal in a bucket, and bring it here. The shovel, too."

Finn rushed to obey, accidentally scattering a few pieces of coal across the floor as he did so. He gasped in dismay and dropped to his knees to shove them into the bucket.

"There's no hurry, lad," Gobber said, frowning.
Finn still ran back to offer up the bucket, his eyes wide with apprehension.

"I'm not a monster, you know." By the time Gobber had built up the fire again, Finn was nowhere to be seen, having presumably whisked back into one of his hiding spots. Gobber shook his head, returned to work for a little longer, then gave up for the day and shuffled back to bed.

The forge never got cleaned or tidied anymore, so it became more and more of a mess. The smaller debris scattered across the floor were the most hazardous for the one-legged man.

This was not at all the first time Gobber had slipped on a nail and fallen heavily to the floor, but this was the first time he was so angry about it. He shouted and cursed without his usual consideration for the hiding child's ears; he snatched up the closest satisfyingly large enough item and hurled it. It was difficult to adjust his wrenched prosthetic and he couldn't reach the ale he'd dropped, and he was too tired and frustrated and worn down to try. He almost felt like weeping.

"...Finn," he finally gasped out. "Finn." The boy approached cautiously. "The flask...pass it over...."

Finn hesitantly picked up the flask, which had fallen and spilled some of its contents. As soon as it was in his hand, Gobber polished off the rest, then tossed the flask aside and rolled over to fall asleep right there on the floor.

Finn stared, his back prickling a little at the sound of the man's snores. Then he looked around. For the first time, he realized just now many bits of scrap metal and other hazards littered the dirty floor, and now he rather wondered how Gobber had managed to get around at all without falling down every five seconds.

Finn picked up a few pieces of debris and studied them for a minute. Then he picked up a few more, and a few more, and by then it was a project. He worked diligently until the whole center of the floor was clear. He was too tired by then to work on the edges of the room or to fish out the small pieces that were hidden under larger piles of clutter, so he curled up in one of his hiding places and went to sleep.
Finn had a job now. No one had ever said anything about it, but he woke up early every morning and went to work just like a grown-up, because someone needed him and he was the only one willing to do such work, and he liked how it made him feel important.

He even got paid. The first time, he wasn't expecting it; he was so focused on sorting items into neat piles that he jumped and yelped when he suddenly found Gobber looming over him.

"You're a Viking, boy, not a rabbit," Gobber grumbled. "Grow a spine."

"I'm sorry," Finn said by reflex.

"Hold out your hand."

After a moment's hesitation, Finn obeyed, trying his hardest to keep from crying. He was astonished when, instead of some sort of punishment descending on him, a coin was dropped into his palm. He stared at it.

"You're a bit young yet for drinking and whoring, but I'm sure you can think of some use for that." Gobber shuffled off, exhausted from his latest expenditure of energy.

Slowly, Finn curled his fingers around the coin. He had no idea what to spend it on, but that didn't matter. Things like this, this piece of cold metal in his hand, they were for grown-ups. For adults. He was a man now. He would save this important adult thing until he knew what to do with it, and in the meantime, he would work hard because he wanted to be good at being a man.

Finn came faithfully to work every day, unless the weather was too bad for anyone to venture outside. At first, the little boy simply kept the floor tidy and was given a coin every week. When the floor was clear enough for him to finish his work too quickly and get bored, he started noticing other messes, like the heaps of junk piled all over the shelves and counters and table. Hesitantly, he started picking at those, too, climbing so he could reach and moving things around until he had worked out a system for organizing them.

Once, while trying to remove things from a shelf, he brought the entire mass of junk down with a huge crash. Utterly horrified, he curled up tightly on the floor with his arms over his head, waiting to be shouted at or hit. He waited for a long time, then finally dared to raise his head, only to see Gobber going about his business as if the man hadn't even noticed Finn's terrible mistake.
The little boy finally rose to his feet and started cleaning up the mess, crying softly, his shoulders hunched in shame. He was astonished when, at the end of the day, Gobber paid him as usual and even added a compliment: "Good work." Had he not even noticed how badly his stupid little assistant had screwed up...?!

By the time Finn had been working in the forge for three months, he'd learned that Gobber pretty much didn't care what he did as long as the boy did not get between the blacksmith and his drink. The one time Finn accidentally spilled half a flask of ale, Gobber grabbed him and shook him and shouted at him. Finn, feeling like pond scum, cried himself to sleep that night and was too miserable to get out of bed the entire next day, faking illness so that his mother wouldn't force him to get up.

The day after that, when he tried to do the same thing, Gobber came stomping into the house around lunchtime, seized Finn by the collar, dragged him to the forge, and ordered him to get to work.

"I'm sorry," Finn begged, "I'm sorry for spilling the--"

"YOU ARE THE GRANDSON OF STOICK THE VAST," Gobber roared. "YOU ARE THE SON OF A MAN WHO COULD BEWITCH DRAGONS. ACT LIKE IT, BOY."

Finn stared, quivering and silent.

Gobber pointed severely. "I'm a worthless old drunk. You are a chieftain's son. Never apologize to me."

How could Finn not apologize when he'd done something wrong? "I don't know what to do to make you like me," he burst out in despair. Then he couldn't hold the tears back anymore. Standing before the looming blacksmith with his shame completely bared, Finn hid his face in his hands and sobbed.

He was shocked when he felt the old man's arms come around him in something like an embrace. Gobber lifted him up, and Finn was startled into meeting his eyes.

"Lad," Gobber said softly, "I hope you haven't been doing all this for me."
"I keep messing up," Finn whispered. "I can't do anything right."

He couldn't understand why a small smile touched Gobber's face then. Gobber looked...a lot better with a smile. "You do well enough. Just don't touch my ale, that's all."

A couple of fresh tears spilled out of Finn's eyes. "If I don't touch the flask, can I still work here?"

"Why do you think I brought you back?" Gobber swung him down and gave him a little shove toward a pile of junk. "Get going. I can't run this place without you."

"Really?" Finn gasped, not daring to believe that he was still needed, that his work still had any value.

"Get to work."

Finn rushed to obey, feeling simultaneously terrified and overjoyed.

One day, Gobber asked abruptly, "Can you make a fire?"

"Soooort of," Finn hedged. He could pretty much light the hearth at home, but he was still smarting with shame from when his mother had taken him and Val out into the woods for training, and he had failed to start the fire for their camp.

"Come here." Gobber taught him how to start and tend the forge fire. "This is your job now. I don't ever want to look over and see that the fire's gone out or too low, you hear me?"

"Yes, sir," Finn said, panicking a little at the added responsibility. He worked hard, not just tending to the fire but trying to remember to keep it going. The first time he forgot, he was terrified when Gobber called for him and he looked and realized that the fire had dwindled to a faint glow. "I told you not to forget. Gah, you're as brainless as your father...." Gobber took another swig from his flask, muttering under his breath. "Screw it. Jansson's not getting his sickle today; I'm going back to bed."

Finn fought back tears and cursed himself as he started working to get the heat back up, then cursed
himself again when he realized he was all alone in the forge and there was no need for a fire anymore. He slunk away, hiding in his room until the next morning, and was late for work because he dreaded it so much that it took a very great act of will to force himself into the shop.

Gobber was singing. "Ah, Hiccup!" He squinted. "The other kid.... Finn?"

"I'm here."

"...Whatever. Go find those horseshoes I was working on yesterday."

"You mean Monday?"

"Yesterday, Monday, whatever," Gobber said, careless and cheerful. He took another drink.

"Are you mad at me?" Finn asked, daring to hope that he'd been forgiven.

Gobber's only answer was to start singing again.

>To be continued....
"Finn and the forge" subplot, part 2

Carried Off, a DreamWorks' How to Train Your Dragon fanfic by Raberba girl (rough draft)

Fragment that I'll move somewhere else in the final draft:

"Gobber," Finn said, "How come you're not as mean to me and Val as you are to everyone else?"

"Because you two are the only people I like," Gobber said emotionlessly.

Finn was quiet for a minute, surprised to be told that the grouchy old man liked him. "Why do you like us?" he finally ventured.

Gobber paused. "...Because I loved your grandparents," he said roughly, "and I loved your dad. Two of them left me and the other one betrayed me; I guess it's only a matter of time before you and Val break my heart, too."

Finn swallowed unhappily. "Do I have to break your heart?"

After a pause, Gobber smiled sadly and ruffled the boy's hair. "Don't worry about it. I barely have any heart left to break."

He sounded like he was trying to be reassuring, but Finn didn't think this really sounded better.

Carried Off, a DreamWorks' How to Train Your Dragon fanfic by Raberba girl (rough draft)

"Finn and the forge" subplot, part 2

By age seven, Finn was fulfilling small orders and quietly fixing some of Gobber's errors.

By age nine, he'd sorted out, updated, overhauled, and was now completely in charge of Gobber's record-keeping.
By age eleven, he could handle all the forgework except for tasks that required extra physical strength - he was still a child and had inherited his parents' wiry frame, and he didn't have nearly as much time for or interest in strength and combat training as his sister did.

Finn was still timid and awkward around his peers, but he had become very comfortable with running the shop. As Gobber slept or drank in a corner, Finn would take orders, perform much of the work, haggle over prices, and address concerns like a professional. He would poke Gobber awake if he needed an extra pair of hands or, sometimes, if he was feeling brave enough to risk it, just for the company.

"You look too much like your dad," Gobber grumbled one afternoon.

From anyone else, it would have been an insult, but "From you, I'll take that as a compliment."

"I mean you standing at the forge there...in that stupid apron...."

"You should wear one when you work, too," Finn said. After having grown accustomed to Gobber over the years, the old man's surliness didn't bother him anymore. "I don't get nearly as many burns this way."

"You know Hiccup came up with that?" Gobber said, sounding like he was complaining. "Always shrieked like a princess whenever sparks flew; showed up for work one day in some ridiculous leather getup...."

"I'm starting to think my dad had more sense than...well, you," Finn teased. He was mildly surprised when Gobber was quiet for a while after that.

"...He did," the blacksmith said. "Was the smartest one in the village before he went mad."

Finn paused so he could look over at Gobber. "What do you mean he was the smartest one in the village?"

"I mean we're *Vikings*, we're *born* muttonheads. Then you get some crazy little shrimp of a kid, always going on about how this is wrong and that's wrong and this could be better and that could be better if we'd ooooonly listened to him...*him*, the little brat...traitor...he left me. He *left me*, the son of a...." Gobber trailed off. "They all left me." He heaved himself out of his chair and stumped off to
his house, presumably to sleep.

Finn kept working quietly, thinking.

The day after Finn's twelfth birthday, he was working in the forge as usual. What wasn't quite usual was the way Gobber was watching him - alert, appraising, and quiet. Finn finally broke the silence. "Think I'm ready to take over your entire livelihood?" he teased.

"Yep, I reckon so," Gobber said softly.

Finn paused, surprised to be taken seriously. "That was a joke, Gobber. I'm just your apprentice; I'm not going to take bread out of your mouth."

"Eh, nothing other than ale makes it into this mouth, anyway," Gobber drawled.

"Nothing much," Finn agreed unhappily. The old blacksmith had lost so much weight in the past few months that Finn was getting distressed for him, but Gobber often flew into a temper when the boy tried to persuade him to eat more.

"You're a man now, Finn."

"Sort of."

"I found my will yesterday. Rewrote it."

"Mm?" Finn said cautiously, not liking the direction the conversation was taking. The people of Berk lived such perilous lives that it was common sense for anyone with any noteworthy possessions to have a will ready to go at all times, but Finn didn't like hearing Gobber talk about this as if he was actively anticipating his death.

"Everything's yours. Got tired of writing and didn't mention Val, so give her a few tidbits; but other
than that, everything's yours."

Finn felt queasy with dread, and tried to tell himself that Gobber was just being whimsical. He didn't quite dare to criticize the man in this mood, so he ventured cautiously, "It's a little odd to leave everything you own to a twelve-year-old, isn't it?"

"Do I look like I care?" Gobber snapped.

Finn came over and put his arms around the old man's neck. Surprised, Gobber patted him awkwardly. "Don't leave me," Finn whispered. "I can't do any of this without you."

"You're a strong lad," Gobber murmured. "You'll be fine."

"Don't you dare commit suicide," Finn growled, and winced when Gobber laughed.

"And throw away my chance to see my friends in Valhalla? Never."

That made Finn feel a little better.

Until the aftermath of the next dragon raid, when the air was still thick with smoke and wails, and Finn had gone out to start searching for wounded survivors in the rubble. He stopped dead at the sight of Gobber the blacksmith, dead in the ashes beside the corpse of a Gronckle, weapon still gripped in his fist, soaked in dragon blood mingling with his own. His cold lips were smiling, as if he had seen the Valkyries coming for him before his heart stopped.

"0.0.0.0.0"

Finn felt too numb to cry. He finished his duties feeling as empty as a draugr, and couldn't muster up any emotion even later, when he was told that he had been given the honor of lighting Gobber's funeral pyre first. The war claimed too many victims for each corpse to have its own ship, but Gobber had once been well-respected in the village and Finn was the son of the chief, so it was Gobber's wishes as expressed in his will that took precedence.

The boy did his duty woodenly, his sister's weeping sounding distant to him even though she stood
close beside him. As Finn watched the ships burn, he realized that tears were sliding down his face, even though he still felt completely drained of emotion.

"I hate it when people die," Valka sobbed. "I hate it, I hate it, I hate it, I hate it...!"

Knowing that she was thinking of Snotlout and her lost friends, Finn wordlessly held her. She cried into his shoulder, but eventually sniffled to a stop and trudged to join the others who were preparing the funeral feast. Eventually, Finn was alone on the shore, staring beyond the pyres into the darkness. 'My father is somewhere out there,' he suddenly thought. He expected to feel something then, but nothing happened.

For about a week afterward, Finn shortened his hours in the forge so that he could work on sorting through what Gobber had left behind. It was strange to realize that he suddenly had a house of his own. Gobber, sunk in depression, had kept it as a dark, filthy cave, but it turned out to be quite a respectable little house once Finn had opened the shutters, spent some time cleaning, and made a few repairs. When he moved his belongings in, it still didn't feel like his house yet, but it did give him a feeling of...newness, as if he had shed the last vestiges of his childhood and really was a man now.

He surveyed his new home from the doorway, as Valka flitted about making comments and moving things around that Finn would simply move back later. His mother stood by his side, and after a while, she awkwardly put a hand on his shoulder. "You'll be all right on your own, then?"

"I have a trade. I know how to cook. I'll be fine."

"I'm not worried about you in the lulls," she said reluctantly, "but what will you do during the raids?"

"What I've always done. I won't have to run all the way from the house now; I'll can get straight to work the instant the alarm sounds."

"I suppose so." Unexpectedly, she put her arms around him, and he returned her hug. "You're growing up," she murmured.

"Yeah."

"...I'll miss you."

He loved his mother, so he didn't want to hurt her by saying that it would be a relief to be out of her household, where he'd always walked on eggshells and learned to endure constant criticism. "It's not like I'm sailing off into the horizon or anything. You'll still see me almost as much as before."

She held him for another long moment, then stepped away, clapped his shoulder, and strode off to return to work.

Valka came bouncing up. "I'm gonna move in with you!"

"No."

"Aw, Finn, I'm old enough to move out, too!"

"Then find your own house. Gobber left this one to me, not you."

She burst into tears, which startled and irritated him. "Why did he have to die?!"

"Everyone dies. Someday the dragons will get us, too."

"Don't say that!" she shouted, shoving him. "Don't say that, never say that, I hate you!" She rushed off.

Since Finn had spent much of his time as Gobber's apprentice sorting out the forge, there weren't many adjustments to make now that the master smith was gone. The only thing to tackle was the workroom. As an apprentice, Finn had organized the shelves and cleared a space around the desk for him to work, but there were still crates piled up that Gobber had never let him touch.

Finn had grown so used to the crates that he'd forgotten about his old childhood curiosity, but now, looking at them and realizing they were no longer taboo to him, those ghostly feelings started to revive.

He remembered how he'd burned to find out what was in those crates, how frustrated and intrigued...
he felt when Gobber had fiercely refused to tell him, and how frightened he had still been of the old smith then, too frightened to disobey. He had even made up stories about all the wondrous things he’d imagined being in the crates, desperate to soothe his curiosity. He had waited for so long to solve the mystery that he’d lost interest in it. Now, suddenly he was free to touch and open the crates and do whatever he liked with their contents. It was a strange feeling.

Finn stood there for a minute, persuading himself that he really was allowed now. Then he pried open the first crate.

He was puzzled and disappointed by what he found inside: a haphazard pile of metal. Frowning, Finn spread out the various pieces, wondering what in the world such strange shapes had been designed for. Each of them had been intricately crafted, but they were not any sort of parts or tools or weapons he was familiar with. They seemed like they, or at least some of them, were meant to function as a unit, but he could not for the life of him figure out how they were meant to be fitted together.

Giving up, he set them all aside in a pile and moved on to the next crate, which was more of the same, this time with mysteriously-shaped materials made of leather and wood mixed in.

Slightly impatient now, Finn moved on to the next crate, which contained tools and odds and ends that he was much more familiar with. The next one was filled almost entirely with paper and parchment.

Surprised, Finn started skimming through them. He had been expecting mundane things like accounts or inventory reports, which some of them were, but many of the papers were more interesting. They showed diagrams, engineer's notes, sketches. Some of the sketches were of Gobber, which made Finn both smile and tear up. Whoever had drawn these images had caught Gobber's likeness perfectly, though the expressions seemed foreign to Finn. The smiles were more careless and friendly, there was a twinkle in the man's eye. Finn suddenly wondered, as he never had before, what Gobber had been like as a younger man, before loss and bitterness had hardened him.

One of the diagrams caught Finn's eye, and he realized after a moment that it was because some of the odd shapes looked familiar. He dove at the first pile of metal he had unloaded and started digging through it, slowly matching parts to the picture. He stared, amazed, then studied the diagram closely and worked until he had more or less reconstructed the gadget.

'*If we'd been using this three years ago, work would have been so much easier.* Why had Gobber kept this thing locked up?! *Had he even known what it was or what it did?* The handwriting on most of these papers was different than Gobber's....
Finn, upon closer study, realized that whoever had written all this stuff had been much better educated and had had much smaller hands than the blacksmith. These crates hadn't been Gobber's at all - so why had they been in his workroom all this time?

A strange feeling wriggled in the pit of Finn's stomach. 'My father was Gobber's apprentice before me,' he remembered. It was now long past the time Finn usually went to bed, but he wasn't tired at all. Heart pounding, he dug deeper into the pile and was startled to come across a sketch of his mother.

She was beautiful. Finn knew in a vague sort of way that his mother was good-looking, but he'd never given any thought to it. It was surprising to see her image here, someone else's perception of her, someone capturing the radiance he must have seen when looking at her, not to mention the fact that this picture had apparently been drawn when Astrid was a very young woman, before she'd gotten the scar on her cheek and before stress and trouble had aged her face.

Finn's fingertips hovered just above the paper, moving slowly from the image of his mother to the image of a stern-looking man Finn didn't recognize, and then to a pair of infants drawn sleeping together on a mat. *Finn*, read the caption. *Valka. Treasures.*

Finn couldn't tear his eyes away from the image for a long time. When he finally set it down and reached for the next thing in the stack, he was too dazed at first to realize that it was a notebook he held rather than a single sheet of paper. He frowned, then edged the book open, feeling torn between anticipation and apprehension.

*To be continued.*...
"Finn and the forge" subplot, part 3

Carried Off, a DreamWorks' How to Train Your Dragon fanfic by Raberba girl

"Finn and the forge" subplot, part 3 (rough draft)

A/N: Warning for more cussing than usual, I couldn't think of a way around it....

o.o.o

It was a journal. There was a date at the top of the first page, and then the entry:

Screw Naming Day. There's no way I'm letting any child of mine get thrown away, no matter how defective it is; they are official people NOW.


I was sitting there holding Finn, feeling like the world had just turned upside down, so it felt like Val showed up two seconds later and the world flipped sideways this time and I'd never felt so happy in my life, but the midwife said they were actually about ten or eleven minutes apart. Astrid's amazing. Still a bitch, though. Yeah, that's what it is; she's always been an amazing gorgeous bitch, hah.

Finn's mouth dropped open in shock - no one had ever dared to so sharply and casually insult Chief Astrid before. His instinctive protectiveness toward his mother clashed with the love for himself and his sister that shone through the pages of the journal.

I'm officially a father now. I thought it would be the most horrible feeling, knowing I'd brought two new lives (two! Not just one, there are TWO OF THEM, aahhhh!) into this rotten world, knowing I'd fail them like I always fail at everything....

But I can't explain it, it's the opposite. They are so perfect, they are SO DAMN PERFECT, their little fingers and toes and everything everything everything about them, Finn holds onto my hand and won't let go, I can hear Val talking to me when she cries, the words are in there already.
I would do anything for them, I would die for them, I would defy HER for them, I would...anything. I thought I was a slave before, but being her dog is SO different than this. Now I'm a slave, I belong entirely to these little ones, and I couldn't be happier about it.

"What is that supposed to mean?!"

Confused and amazed and distressed, Finn shut the book. Then he opened it again and read until the wee hours of the morning, incredulous at this intimate, sometimes disturbing, sometimes wonderful picture of his father that he had never seen before.

Almost everyone always talked about Hiccup the Traitor as if he was vile and conniving. Gobber had spoken of him with bitterness, as if of a beloved son who had deserted his people to serve in the armies of the enemy. Astrid had not tolerated insults to Hiccup's memory, had spoken of him seldom and sadly, as if she could allow herself the pain of missing her husband after his crimes had been suitably punished.

Finn saw little evidence of any of this in the journal. What he saw was an earnest, intelligent, passionate, observant, angry man who loathed both his wife and himself, but loved his children so much that Finn trembled sometimes whenever he remembered that he was the baby boy who had been so doted on.

Finn is incredible. And I'm an idiot.

I tried to teach the twins how to count to five, mostly on a whim. Val soon lost interest like I expected, but Finn kept watching me, so intently I could practically hear him thinking. And then he started counting.

I swear he was counting, he was counting for real, but his poor little fingers were too small and he couldn't make them do what he wanted them to do, he was crying because he thought he'd failed and I tried to comfort him, but how can you make a baby understand that he didn't fail, that it's not his fault his body isn't as strong as his mind, that he did do it right? How do you tell a baby that he's the smartest baby in the world and his father is a moron?

I couldn't make him understand, all I could do was hug him and sing to him and tell him how much I love him, but if he's too discouraged to try again, it's all my fault.

Finn finally had to stretch out on the floor and rest his eyes, but when he woke a few hours later, he
remained holed up in the workroom.

She's getting better, though I think it depends on your definition of 'better.' I could tell she wanted to hit me so bad, her fists were clenched and she had me cornered against the wall and Finn was crying but I didn't dare pick him up.

I don't think she'd ever hurt the babies, at least not when they're still so young.... I've noticed that sometimes, when they're driving her crazy with their crying, she starts blowing up at me no matter what I did or didn't do. I think she's trying to stop herself from taking it out on the children.

I started provoking her when they get fussy, so she can just go straight for me instead of having to talk herself away from them. But she could still hit the kids by accident if they get in the way, so I try not to get too close to them when she's in one of her violent moods.

It couldn't be true. Finn's mother was.... He could see the rage in her eyes sometimes, but she couldn't be a spouse abuser! She had too much self-control for that, too much honor.

Hiding out in the woods at the moment, trying to convince Finn that the scary drizzle won't hurt him. Val's out like a light, thank Freyja.

Astrid tries not to hit me where it'll show, but this time she gave me a black eye and now Gobber's over at the house chewing her out. He's the best and I know he can hold his own if Astrid tries to kill him, but the babies couldn't sleep with all that racket, so I had to take them somewhere quieter.

Finn felt sick. He couldn't believe what he was reading, entry after entry after entry.

She managed to check her punch this time. It might not even bruise, which is great and all, but the look she was giving me! Like she wanted to flay me alive, and would have done so if I was her official slave instead of just her secret one....

How could something like this have gone on for so long without anyone knowing except, apparently, Gobber?! Why had Gobber never said anything about it?!

She raped me last night. Damn her, there IS no other word for it. She hadn't raped me since The Incident, we were doing so good for so long, but-- Dammit, I even know how much I messed up this time, I know how I could have done it better if I'd just been less tired and less drunk and listened to
my better judgment, but why do I have to be perfect every single second of every single day and still pray she won't hurt me, when SHE gets to do whatever she wants and never suffer for it?!

Finn finally reached the end of the journal, feeling numb. The book in his hands was so small, but it held so much pain and joy and fury and fear, so much love and so much hate. He felt like a veil had been torn away, like his own family were strangers to him, like he'd never truly known them until now.

His preoccupation with his father's papers meant that he'd been neglecting his work, so he took a couple of days to catch up. He managed to avoid his mother during that time, but on the third day, she came to the forge. "Finn," she called.

He studied her for a moment before answering. She looked just the same as usual...straight-backed and businesslike, a little tired, with a hint of sadness in her eyes that no one else seemed to notice. She did get aggressive when she was angry, but Finn had seen her at her worst, he had seen her with the villagers, and he knew that she would never truly hurt one of her own people. How could his father have hated his mother so much that he'd filled a whole notebook with lies? "Hey."

"You have time to take a look at my knife?"

"How soon do you need it?"

"It's not urgent, but the sooner the better."

"Hmm." Finn took the knife and held it in his hands for a long moment. Then he looked up and met his mother's eyes. "Mom?"

"Yes?"

"...I'm an adult now."

"Ye-e-es," she said warily. "What is it you're about to ask for that you think I'm going to refuse?"

"Did you love Dad?"
She blinked in surprise. "What...what brought that up all of a sudden?"

"...Gobber had some boxes of Dad's old stuff."

She was quiet for a long moment. "Not now," she finally said. "Come have supper with us tonight, and we can talk."

"All right," he agreed, a little surprised at how calm he sounded. His heart was pounding. "I'll see you tonight, then."

"Love you," she said absently, brushing a kiss against his temple before walking away.

That night, Finn was quiet as he sat at the table in the house where he'd grown up. Astrid, too, didn't say much at first. Valka chattered enough that the silence was filled and she didn't notice anything amiss.

A few bites in, Finn cut through Valka's overly-detailed story about the adventure she and Gruffnut had had that day. "Val, I wanted to ask Mom about Dad."

"Really?" Valka said, surprised and interested enough to forget her indignation at being interrupted. Her eyes immediately swiveled to meet Astrid's. "You never talk about Dad!"

"Finn's an adult now," Astrid said shortly. "He asked, and he deserves to know."

"I'm an adult, too," Valka huffed.

"I found some of Dad's papers," Finn said, cutting her off before she could get distracted. "I never knew he drew pictures."

"He drew pictures?!" Val exclaimed.
"I can show them to you tomorrow," Finn said to his sister, though his eyes were on Astrid.

Astrid sighed deeply. "Yes. He doodled a bit. And drew mechanical designs and things like that."

"I asked you earlier if you loved him."

Valka's interest immediately heightened. "Ooohh! Tell us how you met, Mom! Tell us about when you got married!"

Astrid winced. "It wasn't a romantic love story, Val."

"Was it an arranged marriage?" Finn asked.

"It was...complicated. He was complicated." Astrid looked a little angry. "Everything about your father was complicated."

"I bet he thought you were the most beau-tiful girl on Berk," Valka sighed happily. "And he told you he couldn't live without you and asked you to marry him, and you said yes because he was clever and handsome and he wasn't crazy back then, right?"

Astrid shifted uncomfortably. "He did have a crush on me. But I didn't feel the same; he was...I told you it wasn't romantic, Val. He actually wasn't very handsome, or at least, his looks were more like an acquired taste."

She paused thoughtfully. "I think I was most attracted to him when he was...I don't know how to explain it...when he made some sort of sacrifice I could respect, when he did something kind even though he didn't have to, when he looked at the two of you like you were the most precious things in the world.... I don't want to say I was attracted to his personality, because I wasn't, he had a horrible personality and he drove me crazy. But there were some things he did, some moments when I would look at him, and thought he was the most attractive man on Berk."

Valka smiled as if vindicated.

"What do you mean," Finn said carefully, "that he drove you crazy?"
Astrid eyed him. "I mean he was the most stubborn man I have ever met."

The twins, born and raised among the Vikings of Berk, were impressed.

"He was...he was very frustrating," Astrid continued. "He almost did as much damage to Berk as the dragons did."

Finn and Valka were aghast. "So he was a traitor?!"

"I mean, it wasn't deliberate sabotage," Astrid said, then added in a mutter, "I hope." She shook her head. "I mean, Hiccup Haddock was the most incompetent, clumsy, rebellious, pig-headed Viking I have ever seen. He'd flagrantly disobey orders, which would result in dragons getting access to half our food stores, then he'd try to fix his mistake and fail so badly that the dragons would end up with the other half as well."

"He couldn't have been that bad!" Valka cried.

"I am totally serious. There was some real, genuine discussion about shipping him off to sea, or staking him out on a hilltop and letting the dragons take him, or something just to get rid of him. If his father, the chief, hadn't protected him so closely, he wouldn't have survived adolescence."

"Then we wouldn't have been born!" Valka realized.

"Then why did you marry him?" Finn asked.

Astrid squirmed again. "He was the chief's son and heir. Whoever married him would have a lot of influence in the village."

"You wanted to rule Berk," Finn realized.

"I didn't want power, Finn. If there had been a suitable candidate for the job, I would have stayed quiet and thrown all my support behind him. But there wasn't - your father was clearly, clearly not
suitable to be chief, and the only other candidate was so stupid and arrogant and short-sighted that he would have gotten us all killed within a generation. I took the best of two bad options." She seemed to realize what she'd just said. "He wasn't a bad father at all. He just would have been a bad chief."

"Did you hate each other when you started out?" Finn asked. "Or did you grow to hate each other later?"

"They didn't hate each other," Valka objected. "Mom loves him!"

Astrid, however, was hesitant, and Finn thought she looked guilty. "We didn't...get along very well. We never did. We were incompatible as spouses; I put up with him as best I could because I had to do whatever was necessary for the good of Berk."

"But you always talk about him like you really miss him!" Valka cried.

Astrid sighed a little and said, "It's a lot...a lot easier for me to miss Hiccup when he's not actually here. He's too much, in person."

"What did you do whenever he annoyed you too much?" Finn asked.

Astrid gave him a hard look. "How much did Gobber tell you?"

"Does it matter?" Finn was unable to keep the anger out of his voice. "What did you do to him when he annoyed you too much? What did you do when he wasn't in the mood for sex? What did you do whenever he made a mistake and put Berk in danger?"

Astrid sat very, very still. Valka looked back and forth between them, frowning in puzzlement.

"What will you do," Finn finally asked, "when I tell you that someone in this village thought you were a spouse abuser and a rapist?"

Valka snorted as if the idea was ridiculous.
Astrid's face was pale. "...Have you been talking to his ghost or something?" she said in a low voice.

"Is it true?" His voice was shaking. His sister's eyes went wide.

Astrid took a deep breath. When she spoke, her words were firm. "I have done things in my past that I am not proud of. I didn't treat your father the way I should have, and I realize that now. I should have had more self-control, more self-respect, more...integrity, whatever it is I have now that I was lacking then, I did make mistakes, and I regret it, and I would have done things very differently if I had the chance to do it again."

Valka was looking horrified. "You can't be a rapist, Mom, that's insane!"

"He called it that," Astrid complained. "If he'd just...I was younger then, I didn't know-- I would have done things differently Val! I made mistakes, I'm sorry."

"I don't understand you! You're both crazy!" Valka shouted, and stormed out of the house.

There was a long silence. Finn finally asked, "Was he really a traitor, or was that a lie, too? Did you murder him in secret?"

"No, Finn, of course not!"

"Don't say 'of course not' when you just admitted to all this other stuff!"

"Okay, but I didn't kill him. I mean--" She looked uneasy. "He was a traitor, Finn, and he did go mad. At least before, he was trying to help Berk and only helped the dragons by accident, but...when the dragons took him...I don't know what they did to him, I've never seen those monsters bewitch anyone else the way they did him, but he was never the same after that."

"Gobber always talked about it as if it was the other way around...as if he was the one who could bewitch them."

"Does that make it better?" Astrid snapped. "Either way, there was something different about him, he might as well have been a dragon himself, he helped them deliberately and he wasn't even sorry for
"He would have gone into exile quite happily if not for you two. As if it wasn't enough to betray us, he wanted to take my children, too. He wanted to deprive me of heirs, deprive Berk of two warriors, cut down your generation, I don't know how much longer Berk will last even with you and Val still here, I don't know if any of your children will survive at all...."

Finn definitely did not want to talk about his upcoming duty to sire as many future Viking warriors as possible. He didn't know a single female whom he'd ever want to share a bed with, and he was still too young to marry even if he did have someone in mind. Not to mention the fact that, for all his new-fledged independence, he couldn't imagine himself as a father anytime soon, as being so deeply responsible for any human being other than himself. "Don't try to change the subject."

"I'm not, Finn," Astrid said in irritation. "I'm just saying that, yes, I mistreated your father, but he was no angel, either. He didn't deserve the way I treated him, but he did deserve his fate."

Finn rested his head on his hand and was silent for a while.

"He did love you," Astrid finally said. "Whatever his faults, whatever happened to him with the dragons, one thing that never changed was how much he loved you and Val. I couldn't trust him - but I could trust his love for you." Then, after another long pause, "I love you, too. I know I've made mistakes as a mother, but I do care about you and Val very much."

"Mm."

Then, again, as if the silences were too much for her to bear, "How did you know, Finn? Who told you?"

"You owed me this explanation," Finn said, "but I don't owe you one." He stood up and left the house.

To be continued....
Finn knew that he should melt down the more incomprehensible or useless of his father's inventions and reuse the valuable metal, but even when he tried, he couldn't quite bring himself to do it. He finally packed them all away again, more neatly this time, and went through the rest of his father's papers at a slower pace. Finn was the only smith in the village now, and he couldn't afford to pull unnecessary all-nighters or neglect his work.

It was about two weeks later when he found the letters. He was snowed in, unable to leave the house as a blizzard howled outside. He had enough food and fuel to last for two days; longer if he rationed it. To take his mind off the cold and hunger, he brought a stack of papers and notebooks into bed with him.

Upon the event of my death

Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III

Finn's pulse quickened with excitement at the find. This was his father's will, which would not have been honored due to the man's disgraceful exile. Finn anticipated seeing what the last wishes had been of the enigmatic madman who'd sired him.

There were several papers inside, but the will barely took up half a sheet. A few specific items, most of which Finn recognized, had been left to Gobber; a couple of things had been left to Astrid. The rest had all been left to Finn and Valka. 'He really did care about us.'

Finn was not expecting the next sheet of paper to be addressed directly to him.

To my son, Finn Blackmold Hiccupson:

If you're reading this, it means I'm dead.

Finn's eyes widened. He had the sudden impulse to scan eagerly through the rest of the letter, yet at
the same time, he was almost afraid to be spoken to by his father as if from beyond the grave.

*I'm very sorry for leaving you. I know how it feels to lose a parent too early. If it had been for anything less important, I wouldn't have risked it, but I had to know if there's a way to end the dragon war.*

Finn stared, unable to read on for several moments. *'He was trying to put an end to the war?!!'*

*You and Val deserve to grow up in a better world than the one I did. You deserve to grow up in a world where there's always enough food, where you're not totally used to waking up in the middle of the night to find the house on fire, where seeing corpses is rare enough to be disturbing, where you can look into the eyes of a dragon and see a friend gazing back at you.*

*"He was crazy," Finn whispered aloud.*

*There is something very important that you need to know, Finn. Dragons are not the enemy. They are not monsters, they're not evil, they're not trying to exterminate us.*

What followed was a few paragraphs of a madman's ramblings. Tears came to Finn's eyes from the surge of incredulity, frustration, and anger he felt, and sadness at what had become of his father.

*I'll stop now, because these are my last words to you and I don't want them all to be ranting about dragons that no one else will believe. Dragons or not, I wanted to tell you how incredibly blessed I've always felt to be your father. I agree that I wasn't a particularly good father, I certainly don't think I deserved you, but you and Val really have been the light of my life from the moment you were born.*

*If nothing else, I want you to know that I'm proud of you, Finn. I know I left you when you were too young to remember me, when you probably think you weren't old enough to do anything worth a father's pride, but nevertheless, it's true. I don't care what you've done or haven't done since then, or how many mistakes you've made. Whether you're the golden child of Berk or a hiccup following in your father's footsteps, I KNOW you have what it takes to survive in this world. I know you're stronger than I am. Even as a baby, you were incredibly intelligent and sensitive, you saw and understood so much, and that's what's going to help you when you're faced with difficulties.*

*Maybe you've grown up to be as big and strong as your grandfather, and if you have, that's wonderful. But if you haven't, if you took after me more than I hope you did, then I want to tell you -*
if you haven't figured it out already - that there are other ways to fight. There are other ways to defend yourself. You don't always have to swing an axe or shoot an arrow to prove your strength.

All enemies have something that's valuable to them. Identify it and use it against them if you have to; hold it hostage; cut off their access to it. You have skills and abilities and strengths that can be useful to your enemy. Make yourself indispensable. Hold yourself hostage if you need to. When the odds are stacked against you, fight dirty. You can win.

Hopefully you won't need any of this advice, but I know what it's like to be overshadowed and outnumbered. I would have done anything for a helping hand or even a word of encouragement, for someone to believe in me even a little bit, for just one person to tell me that it wasn't my fault. I didn't know there was anything good about me, or that anyone would ever truly be on my side, until I got carried off by a dragon, but hopefully it won't take such drastic measures for you to realize the same thing.

I believe in you, Finn. I love you with all my heart, and nothing you could ever do would be terrible enough to break that love. I wish so, so much that I could have watched you grow up into the man I know you are today. I hope you've found your way in life, and that you and your sister are looking out for each other.

I know how much you see. I know how smart you are. Look into their eyes, Finn. These slaves, these people with scales and wings, they're hurting just as much as we are. I won't burden you with the task that got me killed - you don't have to save them, or us. But please don't hate them, either.

No matter what, Finn, I am so thankful for the chance to get to know you. You and your sister are more precious to me than anything. I'm sorry for my failures. I know you'll thrive in spite of them.

Finn read the whole letter again, and then again. And again. Then he remembered there were more pages, and he read the letter to Valka. Much of it was the same, but Finn smiled a little to see how his father's tone was a bit altered, as if he had already known how different Val's personality would be from her brother's.

I just finished writing a long letter to your brother, and I'm running low on ink and you probably get more impatient with all these gobs of words anyway, so I'll keep it short, and trust you to steal your brother's letter to read if he doesn't feel like sharing.

I love you, my princess. You have the best of your mother's spirit and none of the worst, and I'm sure that you have grown into quite the magnificent Valkyrie by now. I shouldn't keep complimenting you and inflating your head, but I will anyway because I'm besotted with you and I think you are one of
the most wonderful things in the world.

Just so you know, Val, I'm not crazy. They're probably calling me all sorts of names now that I'm gone (I know that because they called me those same names when I was still alive), but I know you're too sublime to be ashamed of anything, no matter who or what your father was. You're the best and you know it. I wasn't the best, but I wasn't the worst, either, no matter what they say. (I sired you didn't I? So I did get one thing right, at least!)

Actually, I got two things right. Dragons are not the enemy. I know you've probably seen them do many atrocious things by now, but they are not acting of their own free will. Dragons much prefer fish, for one thing; they're only going after our red meat because they're desperate. They play together and argue with each other and make friends and protect their own, just like any other people do. Travel out beyond the Archipelago if you can, and find a dragon and DON'T immediately raise a weapon at it.

Look at its eyes. Toss it a fish. You'll see. There are much bigger forces at work here than anyone else ever realized.

Down to the dregs of ink now. I love you SO MUCH. Take care of Finn. Be strong. Be kind. Your smile lights up the world.

O.o.o.o.o

Finn wanted to keep thinking that his father had been insane, but he still couldn't help watching the dragons more closely during the next raid. He was running around frantically, trying to keep up with the work, but every once in a while there would be a lull, when there weren't any warriors clamoring at the front counter and the forge fire was ready and every spare weapon was sharpened.

Finn watched the dragons. He clenched his teeth and fists when he saw the usual rampaging and pillaging; there was a dead body lying about twenty paces away.

A Nadder paused next to the corpse, ruffling its wings and sniffing at the dead Viking and making croaking noises. Finn's hand crept to his knife, even though he wasn't actually planning on taking on a Deadly Nadder just to save someone who was already dead - someone, in fact, who had always insulted him mercilessly for being the son of the town hiccup, and who had always tried to cheat Finn out of proper payment whenever he came to the forge.
Finn was loyal to his tribe, and would defend even the worst of them from Berk's enemies, but he had no love for this particular man and little motivation to risk so much to preserve the honor of his corpse. Perhaps that was why his head was clear enough to notice what he might otherwise have not.

The Nadder seemed agitated and uneasy. It squawked again, nipped at the corpse in a hesitant way, started to lift it, then dropped it as if in disgust. Which was...a little odd, considering how bloodthirsty dragons were.

The dragon started to turn away, but then shied back as a roaring Viking and Gronckle came tumbling into view, swiping and clawing at each other. The Nadder stretched its neck and wings with a screech, and Finn was just about to reach for a bow and arrow to aid the living man if he could, but then three Vikings came rushing from the other direction, shouting loudly with their weapons raised.

The Nadder screamed and darted away from them, straight at the grappling pair. "Look out!" Finn shouted. The man managed to dodge away in time, to his relief. The Nadder, instead of going after him, nudged frantically at the stumbling Gronckle, pushing it into the air until the Gronckle managed to get its wings sorted out. A thrown javelin missed them, and then they disappeared into the night.

As the trio of warriors joined with the man who had been fighting the Gronckle, Finn relaxed slightly, frowning at the corpse. Why had the Nadder seemed so hesitant to take an unresisting, unprotected piece of meat? It had acted as if it was contemplating such a thing against its first impulse, which...matched his father's claim that dragons did not eat humans, and that the ones who attacked Berk were desperate. Surely there was another explanation, though.

Yet the way the Nadder had helped the Gronckle was harder to make excuses for. Finn, though having survived plenty of raids in his twelve years of life, had not actually experienced much of it firsthand. Of course he saw the devastation afterward, but as a young child, he had always been kept in the caves with the other children and noncombatants; and when he'd gotten older, it was his job to be in the forge, not on the front lines. He hadn't actually ever taken the time to observe a raid before. He had never seen a dragon help another like that, for no other reason than to try to save its life. They weren't joining forces to increase the strength of their attack, they'd simply been trying to escape. 'You wouldn't have to escape if you just DIDN'T ATTACK US IN THE FIRST PLACE!' he thought resentfully.

Loath as he was to accept his father's insane claims, he couldn't get the idea out of his head, no matter how hard he tried. Particularly when he found a journal that his father had started keeping the night he'd written those farewell letters to his children.

_I'd forgotten it was possible to be this happy_, one of the earliest entries read. _I'm not dead. FINN IS NOT DEAD. VAL IS NOT DEAD._
I risked everything. I brought them into the ring with me. My head was telling me that I can trust Hound and the others; my heart was telling me that I was making the biggest mistake of my life.

My head was right. The dragons loved them. I felt like I was back at the Sanctuary again, at least a little bit. Watching Hound dote on Finn like he was her own hatchling, watching Volcano play with Val like he was a friendly grizzly bear playing with an imperious little fawn....

'What?! What?! Whaaaat?!' Finn thought. 'He BROUGHT US into the arena with him, he REALLY WAS INSANE!!'

Theories. Experiments. Anecdotes. It was all in here, all of Hiccup's work with the captured dragons, many of his thoughts about the dragons that had captured him, deeper musings about the war and the true darkness that he thought lay behind it.

Finn pulled an all-nighter again, reading the dragon journal in its entirety. Then he read it again over the course of the next two weeks, more carefully this time, and eventually started a journal of his own.

I'm going to try it in the next raid. Thor help me, maybe insanity is in the blood, maybe someday I'll be as crazy as my father.

He waited again until there was another raid, another lull. Waited for a Gronckle, and the right moment. It was actually two raids later, but finally, the moment came.

Finn was not enough of a traitor to waste even a scrap of food on this crazy experiment, but rocks were expendable. The Gronckle raised its head, their eyes met, and Finn tossed it a rock. Granite. The type Hiccup had claimed was particularly tasty to the lava-spewing beasts.

The dragon automatically snapped up the granite, but then it paused. It glanced warily at Finn, and...its eyes changed.

Just like Hiccup said they would.

Finn slowly picked up another rock and gave it a gentle toss in the Gronckle's direction. It narrowed
his eyes at him, though not in anger; it seemed suspicious. It sniffed at the rock, then ate it, looked at Finn again with its disturbingly intelligent eyes, backed away, then abruptly turned and flew off.

After the raid, Finn journaled about the incident, not sure what to think. The next night, not wanting anyone to see him and connect his unorthodox visit to the arena with his father's traitorous behavior, he crept to the place in secret and opened the Gronckle's pen.

Nothing happened for a minute, then there was a growl. Finn, safely up at the top of the cage, dropped a few rocks down into the arena.

After a couple of minutes, the Gronckle came out cautiously, sniffing its way toward the rocks. After it had eaten them, it looked up and met Finn's eyes for a long moment. It growled again.

"Are you a person?" Finn asked it rhetorically. "Are you just a big bundle of love under that ugly hide of yours?" He watched the dragon for about half an hour as it flew back and forth across the arena, gnawed and pawed at the chains preventing its escape, and finally descended back to the pens, where its pawing and vocalizations sounded plaintive. The Nadder inside the pen let out a cry, and they called to each other back and forth until Finn couldn't bear it anymore. "Stop it! Get back in your pen, you're an animal, you're *not* talking, you're a monster, I hate you!"

He managed to stay away for two whole weeks. Then came a night where he couldn't sleep, no matter what he tried, so he got up and put on his cloak and headed out toward the arena.

He ran into his mother halfway across the square.

They stared at each other for a minute. "What are you doing up and about at this hour?" she asked, sounding confused.

"Umm...is it not my turn for patrol duty?"

"No. Go to bed, Finn."

"Oh, you still get to order me around?" he said ruefully.
She pecked a kiss to his cheek. "I'm your mother, I always get to order you around. Go on to bed, sweetheart."

"Okay."

The next afternoon, he 'wandered' out to the arena and struck up a conversation with the dragon keeper as he fed the animals. Finn pretended he was simply there to chat, but he kept one eye on the dragons, noting the way their ribs showed as they gulped down their meager meals, that a couple of them had minor but still untreated injuries. He almost forgot to keep talking when he witnessed one of the Zippleback's heads reach back behind the dragon keeper and place half a fish in front of the nose of the chained, nearly dead-looking Monstrous Nightmare. The Nightmare exhaled a soft, smoky breath and closed its eyes. The Terror darted in and grabbed the fish instead, but dropped it with a yelp with both Zippleback heads hissed at it.

"Hey!" the dragon keeper shouted, whirling at the noise. "YOU! Back in your pen!" He charged at the Zippleback, which cowered back, hissing, into its pen; the Terror took off flying with a screech. "Blackmold, get the little devil!"

"Are you kidding?! It'll poison me!"

"The gloves are over there, in the long crate!"

Finn had not succeeded in catching the little dragon when he suddenly heard the chief's voice cracking out over the arena. "FINN."

Both young men stopped to look at her. She approached them, her face pale and tight. "Hi, Mom."

"Get out of here," she said harshly. "I don't want to catch you anywhere near this arena without my permission ever again, do you understand me?"

He was pretty sure he knew why she was forbidding him, but it rubbed him the wrong way. "Why?"

"I am your chief," she thundered, "and I expect you to obey orders."
He took a deep breath, trying to hold his own temper in check. A part of his mind was also studying her, looking for clues that she might lash out and hurt him the way she had hurt his father, but though she was definitely angry, she seemed to be as tightly in control of herself as he always remembered her. "Okay, but why am I not allowed to come here when everyone else is?"

She came to a halt in front of him, and he tried hard to hold his ground, even though the fierceness in her eyes was extremely intimidating. Her voice was low and tense, meant for his ears only. "I am not going to lose my son the way I lost my husband."

Finn swallowed. He could think of no protest that wouldn't arouse his mother's suspicions, so he finally nodded and walked away.

In the next raid, Finn was astonished to look up during a lull and find a Gronckle staring right at him. He thought for a wild minute that it was about to attack, but it was just standing there, staring at him intently. It made a hopeful little whimpering sound, and Finn suddenly realized that it was the same Gronckle he had fed granite to last time.

"You're...expecting me to feed you again?"

Encouraged by his lack of hostility, it trundled closer and panted a little.

"...." Finn looked around, spotted a couple of rocks he had been using as paperweights, and tossed them to the Gronckle. It gobbled them up and then looked at him with an expression that he could only describe as 'delighted.' "Now get out of here," Finn said roughly. "Go. I am not your friend."

It did leave (taking a sheep with it, to Finn's outrage...), but in the next raid, it came back. Finn tried to chase it off, but it looked so hurt that he cursed his soft heart and fed it rocks again. That night, he thought for a while until he decided on a name, knowing that he was being unbelievably foolish by trying to make a pet, not just of one of the livestock, but one of the enemy.

The issue ended up being moot, however, because Finn never saw that Gronckle again. It was very likely that the creature had been killed, and Finn vowed to never, ever again make a pet out of anything.
To be continued....
"Finn and animals" subplot

*Carried Off*, a DreamWorks' *How to Train Your Dragon* fanfic by Raberba girl

"Finn and animals" subplot (rough draft)

The chieftain's family did not depend on animals for their living, but on Berk, bartering was more common than monetary payments. The twins were three years old the first time Astrid brought home animals that they were old enough to fall in love with, though she didn't recognize the warning signs until it was too late.

"Valka, Finn, look."

"WHAT IS THAT?!"

"Are they chickens, Mommy?!"

"IT'S SO FLUFFYYYYYYY!"

"Val, don't *grab* them like that!" Astrid explained that the three chickens were their responsibility now, and that the children would be expected to help take care of them every day. She made them help her clean up the chicken coop and feed the birds for the first time, and didn't think there was any harm in leaving the kids outside to play with the creatures as she went out again to return to work, since her mother was still around to do housework and be close by if something went wrong.

Nothing went wrong of the screaming-and-injuries kind. Neither of the women noticed the tender way Finn watched and petted the birds, or the names Valka enthusiastically gave them. "That one is Hilda! That one is Marigold! That one is Valka Junior!"

"I'm going to call you Cluck-Cluck," Finn murmured to the one who was submitting the most happily to his caresses, the one Valka had tried to name after herself. "Because that's the noise you make. Cluck, cluck," he imitated. "Cluck, cluck."

Valka required some extra training, since she often forgot to do chores or didn't want to work or was careless, but Finn, despite some mistakes, was faithful in his care of the birds.
Astrid tried to nip it in the bud as soon as she overheard the children addressing the chickens by name. "Finn, Val, don't name them. They're not pets."

"But they're so fluffyyyyyy!"

"They are not pets, Valka. That one is not 'Hilda,' it is Egg-Layer Number 1. This one is not 'Marigold,' it is Egg-Layer Number 2. And Finn, I'm warning you right now, don't get attached, because the one you're petting is Egg-Layer Number 3, nothing more."

"I don't like that name," he protested.

"You're not supposed to like it. It's not supposed to have a name, Finn, that's the point."

"Bucktooth's chicken has a name."

"Naming an animal 'Dinner' is a joke, Finn."

"Why is it a joke?"

Astrid reminded herself that she needed to be patient. 'He's just a child. Don't lose your temper.' Aloud, she said, "It doesn't matter what the joke is, what matters is that you don't name the animals and you don't think of them as pets. Now come inside."

Finn knew enough to be obedient when his mother and grandmother were watching, but when they couldn't see, he still petted Cluck-Cluck and spoke tenderly to her.

Then winter came, and the hens wouldn't lay, and everyone was so hungry. One afternoon, Finn dragged himself out of bed after an unrefreshing nap and followed the irresistible scent downstairs until he found his mother just starting to ladle soup into a few bowls. "Come eat, Finn."

"Fooooooood!" Val crowed in delight, rushing to the table.
Finn hurried after her, invigorated just by the scent of having something to fill his stomach, and the first several bites were pure bliss. Then Val said, "I loooove chicken soup!"

Finn felt a stab of dread. "Mama," he asked slowly, "where did the soup come from?"

"I made it."

"No. I mean, what... Is this chicken soup?" Of course it was chicken soup, he could taste it. "Where did the chicken come from?!"

"It's ours, of course," Astrid said impatiently. "We had three of them, wasting space and feed; it was high time they started feeding *us* again."

Finn backed away from the table, feeling sick. "You killed one of our chickens?!

"What did you expect, Finn?" Astrid said in exasperation. "That we'd steal someone else's?"

"Wait, you mean this is Hilda?!" Valka cried, waving a chunk of chicken in the air and sounding like she couldn't decide whether to be outraged or laugh. "Or Marigold?!!" Her voice changed to indignation. "Or Val Junior, Mommy, did you kill Val Junior?!!"

"Which one?!" Finn cried, more frantic than his sister. "Who did you kill?!"

"You mean the chickens? It doesn't matter; none of them were laying."

Finn rushed to the chicken coop. He stared at Hilda and Marigold as they drowsed together; he stared at Cluck-Cluck's empty roost. His stomach turned and he retched up what he had just eaten, then cried for nearly an hour.

"Finn," Astrid said as she held her sobbing child in her arms, "*this* is why we don't name them. They are *not* pets, they give us eggs and meat and *that's it*. This is why I told you not to name them."
"Why couldn't you have at least killed Hilda or Marigold?" he wailed. "Why did you have to take Cluck?! Why did you have to take her?! She was my friend! Why did you have to take her?!"

"Finn, this is what chickens are for."

"No, they're not, they're for eggs!"

"They're for eggs and meat. They lay eggs until they can't anymore, and then we eat them."

"I hate you...I hate you, she was the only one who loved me and you killed her, I hate you...!"

When the twins were four and their family obtained a couple of sheep, Astrid was very stern with the children right from the beginning, and expressly forbid them to name the animals. Valka, once her mother was out of earshot, named them anyway, and Finn silently thought of the sheep by their names in his mind, because there were two of them and he had to distinguish between them, didn't he?

Still, he tried not to get attached to them, but when his mother served mutton during the worst of that winter and there was only one sheep left, Finn could see nothing but warm eyes and curly wool and that funny bouncing tail, and he could hardly bring himself to eat. He felt more tired after that meal than he'd felt when he'd been lethargic from hunger before it.

Astrid made her children take on more responsibility as they got older. Valka, despite her initial protests, could soon help with most of the butchering process expertly and without balking.

Finn managed to put it off until he was on the late side of six years old and Astrid forced him to learn this basic skill. He cried and begged, but she was merciless, and he was so upset that even though he had watched the process many times, his hands were unsteady and it took him two tries, the chicken screaming before he managed to silence it, still flapping wildly even after he had, frantically, sawed off its whole head in an effort to end its pain and distress.

When the bird finally went still, Finn threw down the knife and fled, screaming again in horrified fury when he started to lift his hands and saw them covered with blood.

He vowed to never eat meat again and stubbornly stuck to his resolution until the next winter, when he nearly died of starvation. He found, then, that he could tolerate jerky if he was desperate; he also
found that he could eat fish if he had to, since it bothered him less than the flesh of warm-blooded animals. Still, he preferred a meatless diet, and he could not force himself to eat fresh meat no matter how hungry he was.

Astrid grudgingly respected his wishes in this, since even she realized that she could not force Finn to do anything when he stood still and silent, not arguing with her, listening to her scolding with bowed head and no move to either obey or offer any defiance. Astrid did not, however, allow him to get away with anymore than that, and Finn did his share by trying to shut down his heart when it came to any furred or feathered creature that looked at him with intelligence in its eyes.

It worked until Snowy. Finn was eight years old, resentfully throwing feed at the newest batch of chickens, when one of them fluttered up to perch on him. He stared at her for a minute, then shook his arm. Rather than being knocked off, she simply tightened her claws and clucked in a satisfied sort of way.

"Get off, stupid."

She looked him right in the eye and made a soft chirring noise.

"Get off. I hate you. You're stupid and fat and I'm going to eat your babies, and I'll eat you someday."

She picked curiously at his hair. He bit his lip in dismay, already sensing that it was too late.

He hid it well and refused to name her for months. He yelled at the chickens, flung down their feed contemptuously, and chased them off when they got too close. Only one ignored his theatrics, often fluttering up to perch on him and preen his hair. He pointedly slaughtered her flockmates right in front of her, but she simply shied away from the mess and then came right back up to him as if nothing he did could possibly break her trust in him.

It didn't help that she was strangely friendly with all humans, that she perched on and preened and cooed at Valka and Astrid and the children's grandmother, too. It didn't help because when more than one human came out at the same time, Finn was always the one she gravitated toward...not that anyone else seemed to notice her preference.

Finn eventually gave in and doted on Snowy when no one else could see, doing the livestock chores as much as possible so that it wouldn't make his mother suspicious when he rushed to volunteer for
butchering. He wanted to make sure that he was the one cutting all the birds' throats, because then he could ensure that the dying chicken wasn't Snowy.

His strategy worked for months, even through most of the difficult winter. It was just when the cold was starting to ease up, when all the food had been exhausted and there was literally nothing left to eat, when Astrid ordered her son to have the last chicken ready to cook for supper that night.

Finn felt numb. "Y...Yes, ma'am," he choked out, because he couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Do you want Valka to do it?" Astrid asked. "It really is her turn--"

"No, Mom, no, I'll do it."

His mother left. Finn trudged over to Snowy, feeling dead inside. She fluttered right up into his arms and nestled there, cooing. He felt like he couldn't breathe. "...I can't do it," he finally realized. "I can't."

She nibbled at his tunic. His brushed his face gently against her soft feathers. Then, before he could change his mind, he headed straight into the woods.

He walked until he couldn't see the village anymore, then kept walking. Snowy was squawking uncomfortably, but he held her tight, determined not to let her go until they were far enough away that no Viking would be able to find her and catch her and kill her. He remembered that adults had more stamina than children, so he kept going even after he felt like he'd gone far enough. Then, exhausted, he set Snowy down on the forest floor and made shooing motions. "Go, Snowy. You're free."

She screeched unhappily in the cold and huddled by his feet.

"Snowy! Shoo!" He gently but firmly shoved her away with his foot, then turned and tried to walk back to the village.

She followed him.
After several minutes of trying to get the chicken to wander off on her own, Finn finally realized, to his horror, that Snowy was not going to leave him. He stared at her for a minute as she clucked in distress and pecked at his boot. At last, he sat down and held her in his arms, shivering, having no idea what to do. He wondered bleakly if he was going to freeze to death out here trying to protect his chicken. He might have dozed off at one point.

Then suddenly he was wide awake and running for his life. He hadn't even gotten a good look at the creature that had come bursting out of the trees, but he knew it was a dragon, knew he had to run--

There was a cry behind him, and he stopped. He wouldn't have if he'd been thinking, but as if his body wasn't his own, Finn turned back at the exact same moment the Deadly Nadder raised its head.

Their eyes met. Blood dripped from the dragon's jaws; Snowy's mostly-severed wing dangled for a moment, before the dragon gulped and swallowed the last of the bird. Finn, feeling detached from his body, noted that the Nadder was skeletally thin before he remembered that it was going to come after him next. He had to run.

The dragon was just lowering its head to nose around the bloody dirt when Finn turned away to flee again. The boy raced back toward Berk, crying, full of despair. He didn't care overly much whether the dragon caught him or not. All he could think about was that he'd gone to so much trouble for nothing, he'd disobeyed his mother for nothing, now Val was going to go hungry tonight and it was all Finn's fault and Snowy wasn't even free, she was DEAD, Finn had accomplished nothing except to hurt everyone he cared about....

He was beyond tired by the time he trudged back into the village and found that a search party was being organized for him - his mother had been understandably alarmed when he disappeared for so long after being sent to do a simple task. She dragged him back to the house, slammed the door violently, and clutched her son in a painful grip as she shook him. "WHERE WERE YOU?"

"I'm sorry," was all he could say.

"WHAT HAPPENED?"

"N...Nothing."

"FINN BLACKMOLD HICCUPSON."
He was shaking in terror, but he knew there was no escape. Better to just get it over with. "The chicken's gone. I'm sorry."

She stared at him for a minute in confusion, her grip loosening slightly. He suddenly realized that she hadn't known he'd left on purpose. Maybe she thought he had been attacked.

"I...I...." Should he lie?

Her grip tightened again. "Finn," she hissed, "explain to me exactly what just happened here. I sent you out to butcher a chicken, and you COMPLETELY DISAPPEARED for two hours. What happened?"

He swallowed. "Please don't be mad at me."

"If you don't tell me what happened right this second, I'm going to punish you as if you deserve the worst."

"I do deserve the worst," he said miserably.

She stared at him again, but he couldn't bring himself to elaborate. She would be so incredibly disappointed in him, that he was so weak and disobedient and stupid. "You didn't let that chicken go, did you? And then just leave without telling anyone where you went?"

"...."

"DAMMIT FINN. YOU KNOW BETTER."

"I couldn't, Mom! I couldn't! I couldn't!"

She was furious again, giving him another shake as if she wanted to slam him against something. "There is NO FOOD tonight. NONE. Your sister will STARVE because of you, you stupid, selfish little bastard."
There was nothing he could say to that. He cried, loathing himself, even before she picked up a belt. He knew it would be worse if he ran or fought, but he couldn't help backing away and trying to plead with her. She took a moment to calm herself before she started hitting him, but the blows, though there weren't many of them, were merciless, and he couldn't keep silent like he'd wanted to. He was crying so hard that he couldn't get up for a while even after she'd finished. Even after he managed to reach his bed, he lay feeling so agonized with shame and failure and pain that he wanted to die. He was already so hungry, he was already such a waste of space, he'd just lie here until he starved to death.

Late that night, Valka crawled into bed with him. He didn't respond, and she was quiet until she stopped shivering and their shared body heat under the blankets made both of them feel the warmest they'd been all day. "Finn," she finally whispered.

"I'm sorry," he whispered back.

"Mom whipped you, huh."

"It's my fault there's nothing to eat."

"I'm so hungry."

"I'm sorry."

She nestled her head into the crook of his neck. "I love you, Finn."

Tears stung his eyes, and he tried hard to hide them from his sister. She was so much braver and stronger than him. He couldn't bear it if she scoffed at him.

"Does it still hurt?"

"...Kind of," he managed to choke out. After a moment, the tears were under enough control that he could speak without giving himself away. "Not really if I keep still. They hurt to touch, though."

"I hate her sometimes."
"It was my fault," he said miserably. "I tried to set Snowy free...and then she got eaten by a dragon anyway. I'm so stupid."

"I'm so hungryyyyy...."

He wrapped his arms around her and held her tightly.

"I don't think I'll mind dying too much if we go together," she murmured.

"I should die first. Then you can cook me and have a feast," he said, only partially joking.

"Gross, Finn." She bit him playfully. Then they both went quiet and eventually fell asleep.

To be continued....

Author's notes: I did as much research on chicken butchering as I could for this chapter, though not enough to feel comfortable writing about it. One thing I wanted to note is that Astrid, out of necessity, is operating on a "Waste not, want not" mentality, since the meat of old laying chickens is lower quality than the meat from chickens that were specifically raised to be eaten.

Also, chickens apparently have more personality than I thought.
Gruffnut subplot

Carried Off, a DreamWorks' How to Train Your Dragon fanfic by Raberba girl

Gruffnut subplot (rough draft)

A/N: I'll explain more in a different subplot, but just be assured that Tuffnut is Gruff's adoptive father. No incest here! X'D

0.0.0

Gruffnut was three years old when she first started to notice.

Her parents where throwing knives at each other again. This in itself was not noteworthy, and nothing bad had happened before, and Gruff was too young to notice how narrow the escapes were sometimes.

But she had apparently not inherited Ruff and Tuff's luck, and during this particular incident, one of the knives missed its mark and sliced its way across Gruffnut's scalp instead.

While the little girl was still sitting there in shock, Tuffnut said casually, "Aw, crud, you hit the kid. Nice going, sis."

"I wouldn't have hit the kid if you'd just stayed still, muttonhead."

Then Gruffnut started crying, first from distress and then from seeing how much she was bleeding. Her parents bickered the entire time they were treating the shallow but long cut, and from then on, Gruffnut ran to a different room whenever the twins started throwing sharp objects around.

By the time she was five, she'd tasted food cooked by many people, either meals eaten at her friends' houses or tidbits given to or stolen by the children as they played about the village.

Nothing was worse than Chief Astrid's food, but Gruffnut gradually became aware that her own parents' cooking wasn't much better. "Your food is always so yummy," she said wistfully one time to
Bunny as they ate together.

"Daddy's a really good cook," Bunny said proudly.

"Why?"

"Hmm...I don't know!"

The next time Gruffnut ate at Bunny's house, she ignored the game the girls were playing and came to watch Bunny's parents cook instead. "Would you like to help, Gruff?" Fishlegs asked.

"I don't know how," she said shyly.

"That's all right, we'll teach you. Here, spear these pieces of meat onto the skewers and I'll show you what to do with them."

Gruffnut started trying the things she learned. She found that, even though her own food wasn't nearly as good as the grown ups' who knew how to cook, it still often tasted better than her parents' food. By the time she was six years old, she was doing all the cooking for the household (the few times she tried to leave it up to her parents, they claimed it had been so long since they had cooked that they'd forgotten how).

Around five or six years was also when Gruffnut started noticing differences in the way her parents kept their house. Everything was a mess - Ruffnut and Tuffnut tended to keep their stuff in separate piles, but there was no organization to it, and items often got thrown around during fights or experiments. Tuffnut did like to decorate, but his creativity was only concerned with arrangements. As long as whatever wall or floor space he needed was clear, he could care less where all the junk got moved to, or whether there was mud on the floor or trouble spots that had never been repaired.

Gruffnut had grown up with the mess and was quite used to it until she noticed that it was easier to move around safely in tidy houses. She rarely stepped on things or cut herself or knocked things over at her friends' homes. She was surprised the first time she was about to re-use a plate that hadn't been washed, and her friends reacted with disgust. She made up some excuse and pretended that of course she hadn't actually planned to eat off it, ew! But it was yet another thing to start paying attention to....
cook again. Gruffnut hadn't known that. And once she learned, she couldn't unlearn it, and was frustrated with her parents for acting so unconcerned when everyone else made it seem like a bigger deal. "Tuffnuuutttt, don't put it there, there's stuff from yesterday still on it!"

"So?"

"So WASH it first, Tuffnut!"

"Pah. You're just trying to trick me, aren't you."

"...What?"

So Gruffnut angrily started to clean, too, but she soon got fed up with her irresponsible parents and decided to only clean her stuff. If her parents wanted to eat off dirty plates and sleep on dirty bedding and trip over all their stuff, fine. She was going to take care of herself, and that was it.

"Behold! My masterpiece!" Tuffnut crowed, gesturing at the tapestry he'd just finished.

"Tuffnut!" Gruff whined, you put all this stuff in my part of the room! I told you not to do that!"

"See how well the colors complement each other," Tuffnut went on, lovingly running his fingertips over the threads, "that took me a while to figure out, the blue wasn't cooperating, but it looks awesome now!"

Gruff sighed loudly and shoved the haphazard pile of junk back over the boundary line she had marked on the floor.

The girl was also very young when she learned what warranted running to get the chief and what didn't. At first, she simply watched in confusion as Astrid yelled at the Thorstons, but then Gruffnut started noticing herself whenever Ruff and Tuff's antics put the village in danger or hindered people's work or broke laws that were supposed to protect the villagers' health and property. Gruff also learned that Astrid didn't want to be interrupted about other things, like when the Thorston twins were simply wasting time or working hard on useless projects.
"But they're scaring me!"

"Gruff, I know, and I sympathize, but I really need to be here making sure nothing goes wrong - and as long as your parents aren't blowing anything up, they're kind of low on my priority list right now. Just...just stay out of their way for a while, sweetie, all right?"

Gruffnut spent as much time as she could outside the house, usually hanging out with her friends. By default, her friends were the other girls in the village, because there were so few of them.

The chief's daughter was the ringleader, the smallest of them in stature but somehow seeming the biggest (she was definitely the loudest). Valka liked to lead them in training and dictate their games, and would fight anyone who crossed her - fights which she usually seemed to enjoy.

Gruff usually just took the path of least resistance; her own preferences weren't worth fighting for when she was up against such a spitfire. She didn't understand why Bunny, who hated being bossed around, always unintentionally seemed to do things that would prompt Val to try to boss her even more.

"Noooo, Valka, we already did training today, I'm tired!"

Gruffnut felt the same, but was simply planning to go through the motions, appeasing Val with the appearance of practice while really conserving her energy.

"Who cares if you're tired! We still have to practice!"

"But I don't want to."

"Don't be a baby, Bunny!!"

"I'm not a baby!"

"Then be a woman and FIGHT ME!"
"No! I don't want to! I'm going home!" Bunny turned her back to walk away, but Valka pounced, as everyone (except Bunny, apparently) had known she would do. The two girls screamed as they tore at each other, Valka in excitement and Bunny in fury. Val reveled in the chance to practice her how-to-fight-an-opponent-who's-bigger-than-you tactics; Bunny, so upset that she was moving on instinct, did her best to pound her tormentor into the ground.

Valka eventually emerged bruised and bleeding but victorious, perched atop Bunny with a huge grin on her face as the bigger girl sobbed into the ground. "I win!"

"I hate you...I hate you, I hate you...!"

Despite how badly Val and Bunny got along, they were assigned together, along with Gruffnut, on a training assignment when they were ten years old, expected to survive for three days and two nights in the woods with no adult help and minimal supplies.

It was not their first such assignment, and they did fairly well. The first night, they covered themselves with leaves for insulation and huddled together for warmth, Gruff in the middle because Bunny refused to sleep next to Valka.

Gruffnut was drowsing to the sound of Bunny rambling about constellations, when Valka heaved a long sigh and started fidgeting. "Val...stop moving, I'm trying to sleep...."

"What are you doing?" Bunny asked.

"I want to read my letter." Valka squirmed closer to the fire and carefully smoothed out a piece of parchment.

"What letter?"

"The letter my daddy wrote me."

That woke up Gruff. She and Bunny both sat up, staring. "Your dad?!"

"A long time ago, when I was a baby. He wrote me a letter. Finn found it when Gobber died." She
read the letter out loud to them. The girls listened quietly, a little stunned, feeling things they didn't expect to feel at the words of a traitor.

"I love you, my princess. You have the best of your mother's spirit..." Valka read eagerly until, "Actually, I got two-- Um." She squinted at the page. "Ummm, blah blah...oh. He says, I love you SO MUCH. Take care of Finn. Be strong. Be kind. Your smile lights up the world."

She was silent for a while. Finally Bunny said, "Wow. He...doesn't sound crazy."

"He sounded kind of nice, actually," Gruffnut remarked.

"I miss my daddy," Valka said in a low voice.

Gruffnut knew how she felt. She had a dad, sort of, but she didn't feel safe with him, and...and he wasn't her real dad, anyway. She had no idea who her father was, and he probably wasn't a great person, anyway, if he'd knocked up her mother and then refused to take responsibility. Gruff, wanting to cry, moved so she could put her arms around Valka.

Bunny caught herself just in time from saying that she missed her daddy, too. She did miss him, but he was waiting for her back home, probably fretting and worrying about her, ready to wrap her in a huge wonderful hug the minute he saw her again. Neither of the other girls had that.

Valka's father was probably dead, and she'd never see him again even if he wasn't. Despite Bunny's dislike for the other girl, she had a generous spirit, and her feelings right now were all pity. She ended up hugging Val, too, and the girls fell asleep that night snuggled closer together than they'd been before.

The older Gruffnut got, the less she could stand living in her parents' house, and the more she yearned to get out and have a life of her own, where she could make her own rules and be safe.

Unfortunately, her options were rather limited. She tried to take on odd jobs whenever she got a chance, but it was going to be a long time before she had enough saved up to live on, and she didn't have a regular trade to sustain her in the long term. Her combat skills, while decent, were nothing special; she found training tiresome, and forced herself to the basic practice sessions but marveled at
people like Valka who seemed to have boundless energy and enthusiasm even when spending hours repeating a single move. Gruff couldn't bring herself to have that level of dedication, even though she tried. She would never be able to make a living from special assignments.

Her best bet was to get married, but the pickings on the island were...rather slim, and getting slimmer every time another boy was lost to illness or fire or the other many hazards of life on Berk. Gruffnut's looks certainly didn't help.... She had inherited the solid masculinity of her mother's face, and she had neither Bunny's ample figure nor Valka's vivacious personality to make up for it.

After both the boys she wouldn't have minded marrying died, she was forced to face the fact that she would have to marry someone she didn't like. Juuuuust when she had accustomed herself to the idea and decided that Bucktooth was the best of two bad options, Bucktooth's broken body was found at the bottom of a cliff after a battle, clutching a rack of dried meat. Such things had happened before, when a warrior leaped at a flying dragon to rescue its loot but had not managed to extricate the food before the beast flew too far away from safe ground.

Gruff cried at Bucktooth's funeral, because she cried at all the funerals and it was sad. Bucktooth, while not prime husband material, hadn't been a bad person, and she would miss him just like she missed everyone else who had fallen in the war.

She was also, however, crying because she could see her hopes for a bearable future slipping further and further away every year, and it occurred to her that maybe she herself would die before adulthood and make all her fears and worries moot. I have to do something.

She had to get married as soon as she was old enough, and Finn Astridson was now the only candidate on the island anywhere close to her age. Therefore, despite her initial reluctance, she forced herself to see him as her future husband until the idea started to seem mildly attractive. While not exactly handsome, Finn was...a pretty boy, that's what it was. Not reassuring as a protector/provider figure, but nice to look at from a purely aesthetic perspective.

Yet he could provide, even if he didn't look the part. He was the only blacksmith in town, he had far more wealth and independence than anyone else in their generation. And while the shadow of his father's shame lingered over him, he himself was not like his father. He contributed to the good of the village, and he never caused any disasters like in the legendary tales of Hiccup the Traitor. He was quiet, but that actually might be a good thing in a husband - no stomping around arrogantly, less likely chance of abuse.

Yes...Finn Astridson would make a decent husband, and he was Gruffnut's best chance at escaping her parents' house. Now she just had to make sure she claimed him before anyone else did.
To be continued....

Author's Notes: *HEADDESK* There are yet more glaring continuity errors in this subplot. I'll...fix them, I'll fix them later, but I wanted to post this now. X'''D This subplot works better as a characterization exercise for Gruffnut (which was actually the sole reason I wrote it) than it does as a legitimate part of the story. DX

Privately, the twins and their mother still think of their surname as Hiccup's, but officially, their surname changed to be derived from their mother's name after their father was exiled. That only just occurred to me while writing this subplot, so I hope that means I didn't make a mistake in the previous ones. I think "Hiccupson/daughter" was only used in private contexts.

I originally considered making Gruffnut like her parents, but that seemed boring. So then I thought, "What would it be like for a poor kid who had to be raised by Ruffnut & Tuffnut?" The kid would probably grow up feeling really unsafe with parents like that, so things like safety and responsibility would be important to her. I don't know if Gruff is like that naturally, but regardless, it's a survival tactic she's had to learn. The older she gets, the more she wants to disown her crazy parents. X'D
If you're wondering what happened: I barely touched the story itself (I don't have time to edit it yet), but I did do a lot of re-labeling, and cleaned up the author's notes while I was at it.

It occurred to me that, while it's been super-helpful for ME to break the fic into manageable chunks while I'm working on the first draft, it's better for the readers if the story is less fragmented. So no more story arcs! Just smooth transitioning from one chapter to the next, and then the jumble that is the "Interim" WIP (which I will fix into proper chapters when I finish "Interim").

A/N: While re-watching the music video for P!nk's song "Try" recently, I realized that it fits HiccStrid in this AU really well. It's still one of the best music videos I've ever seen; I like that it actually tells a story and is relevant to the song it depicts.

*Carried Off*, a DreamWorks' *How to Train Your Dragon* fanfic by Raberba girl

Random snippet: Val's letter (rough draft)

Finn had every intention of giving his sister the letter Hiccup had written to her, but he wanted to make a copy of it first to keep for himself. He didn't like admitting it to himself, but every word from the enigmatic father he would never meet was precious.

He was also rather resentful about Hiccup's opening encouragement to his daughter.

"It's my letter," Finn grumbled as he laid out the parchment and ink, "he has no right to give her permission to steal it." Which was why Val would be getting the copy of her letter rather than the original.

"I love you, my princess," Finn wrote, firmly skipping over the first paragraph of the letter. "You have the best of your mother's spirit...."

He finished the paragraph, but then paused. Should he skip over all the dragon ravings, too...? He debated with himself for a moment, but then thought about how he would feel if someone gave him a copy of a letter from his father that had had things omitted. He sighed, dipped the quill into the ink, and transcribed the rest of the letter faithfully.
Finn had to wait until an evening after he got off of work and could be sure of catching Val without either her friends or Astrid around. It ended up being after Valka had gone to bed, but she hadn’t fallen asleep yet. She called out nervously when she heard the front door open. "It’s just me, Val," he called back.

"Finnyyy!" Valka rushed out of her room and flung her arms around her twin.

"Hey, sis. Good to see you."

"It's so late! What are you doing here?" she asked, eagerly tugging him over to a bench. She shoved him down to sit on it, then plopped next to him and snuggled into his side.

"I...came to give you something." It felt awkward trying to bring up the subject of their father out of the blue like this.

"Give me something??"

"Hmmm...well, you know how Gobber left the forge to me?"

"Yeah?"

"Well...I've been doing some cleaning and organizing, and...I found some papers that belonged to Dad."

Valka straightened and stared at him.

"And...one of the papers was a letter. To you." Finn held it out. "From Dad."

She gasped. "From Dad?! He wrote me a letter?!"
"A long time ago. He wrote us letters when we were babies, before he was exiled. He--"

Valka snatched the letter out of his hand and unfolded it eagerfly.

"The original was water-damaged," Finn said quickly. "It was falling apart, so I had to copy it. That's why it's in my handwriting."

Valka didn't seem to be paying attention. She was reading aloud, slowly, looking simultaneously delighted and frustrated. After a couple of sentences, she thrust the letter back at her brother. "Read it to me!"

Finn obliged. Valka listened in complete silence except for a gasp here and there, looking riveted. "Oh," she said when he finished, "oh, oh, Finn, read it again! Read it again, Finn, read it again!"

"Okay, okay," he chuckled. He cleared his throat. "I love you, my princess...."

After he'd read it aloud a second time, Valka, who'd only interrupted to tell him to skip over the dragon part, took the letter out of his hands and read it to herself in a murmur. She sighed and leaned against her brother again. "Ohhhhh. Finn."

"It feels weird, doesn't it," he said softly. "And nice. To hear from him."

Tears were starting to well up in her eyes. "I want to talk to him."

"Yeah. I do, too."

"I wish he was here, Finn...I wish Daddy was here."

"...Do you want me to sleep with you tonight?" Finn offered awkwardly. He really didn't want to, but their mother wouldn't be back home for at least another day or two, and he knew that Valka would have been lonely to begin with. After the letter, she'd definitely need company now.

"Please, Finn!"
"Okay. I'm going to get another blanket, though; give me a sec." After they'd settled down together, he heard her crying quietly, so he stroked her hair without saying anything.

He wondered how many of the other papers he should show her. He knew she'd have no interest in the mechanical designs. She would love the other drawings, but he would keep the ones he liked most secret, because she might try to take them and he wouldn't be able to stop her. As for the journals....

Well, Val probably wouldn't want to read them directly, though she would certainly want to hear them. He could read the safer entries to her out loud, and skip over the ones he thought their father would want to keep private. "There are some other things I can show you," he said. "But I've got work and stuff, so you'll have to come to my house after supper sometime. Oh, and there are some things in his will, and Gobber's, that they wanted you to have, so I'll give you those while we're at it."

"Okay."

"...I miss him, too, Val."

"I wish he wasn't crazy."

"Me, too."

They both sighed at the same time, and eventually drifted off to sleep.

_Carried Off, a DreamWorks' How to Train Your Dragon fan fic by Raberba girl_

Random snippet: Dragon Voice (rough draft)

A/N: This is soon after Eret came to the Sanctuary.

o.o.o
Hiccup awakened to the sound of a dragon dying horrifically. He sat up just in time to see Eret fling the Dragon Voice across the room, shove his hands in his pockets, and give Hiccup a panicked, apprehensive glance that made him look like a child who'd been caught with his hand in the treat jar.

"Don't throw it, are you crazy?!!" Hiccup rushed over to his prize creation, lifted it tenderly, and inspected it for damage. He was relieved to find that the dying-dragon sound had been made by Eret manipulating one of the controls improperly rather than something he'd have to fix. The device had a new small dent in it, but nothing that would affect its function. "Be careful with this, Eret. It took me a long time to make it."

"I-- I didn't-- You know, I was only--"

Hiccup stared at him, at the way Eret was trying so hard to appear casual and failing miserably, and realized that Eret was afraid of being in trouble. Hiccup made sure to keep his voice gentle when he said, "You could have asked to borrow it any time, you know. You didn't have to wait until I was sleeping to take a look."

Eret's face flushed. "I just...I don't know, I see you talking to the beasts with that crazy thing, I...don't...."

"Would you like me to make you one?"

Eret's eyes widened.

"I'd be happy to. It's a lot easier now that I have a blueprint and some experience."

"I...guess...it'd...come in handy...." Despite Eret's hesitant tone, his eyes were bright with curiosity.

"Come here, let me show you how this works." Hiccup beckoned until Eret drifted close, and then he started indicating each point of interest on the device, explaining how it made its dragonlike noises. "When you pull this out, it releases a cascade of tiny gravel bits and makes that rattling sound. You can turn it over to let the bits fall the other way. This here puts pressure on a strip of metal inside to make that wailing sound...wind this and it will squawk, it runs a tongue across a series of plates...."
Author's Notes: A reviewer reminded me that I ought to specifically mention the Dragon Voice, instead of just assuming that everyone has read all of my fanfiction and figured that Hiccup would make and use it in this universe as well. XD Sorry that I still did a lousy job of describing it...! (I don't actually know what it looks like, myself, so... ^^;)

Carried Off, a DreamWorks' How to Train Your Dragon fanfic by Raberba girl

Random snippet: Hound & Reign (rough draft)

The only warning Hiccup had was that all the dragons in his troop abruptly went alert, their eyes fixed on a point somewhere behind him. Before he could turn around, something crashed into him.

The next few moments were a disorienting whirl of dragon cries, Eret's shouting, and a buffeting that made Hiccup think that he'd been attacked by a dragon. But then the squirming weight on top of him started bathing his face with a huge tongue, and he realized he was being greeted with an overabundance of enthusiasm instead.

"Okay...okay, glad to see you, too, whoever you are...."

"Friend Friend Friend Friend Friend Friend Friiiiiieeeennnnddd!" the dragon was purring. "Friend-Human!"

Hiccup felt like there was a second dragon trying less successfully to get at him, too, but then human hands grasped his arms and the crushing weight started to ease, and then Eret was pulling him to his feet as Toothless shoved the dragon aside.

Hiccup blinked, gasping, trying to get his bearings. Then his eyes widened in surprise. "Oh, wow - it's been a long time since I've seen those breeds--"

Then he specifically recognized the excited Gronkle and Nadder. "HOUND! Reign, it's you! You found me!"

Hound was still preoccupied with Toothless, but Reign bounced at the sound of her human name, ducked around Cloudjumper, and dove at Hiccup (which spooked Eret into dashing back to Skullcrusher for safety). The Nadder nuzzled Hiccup hard, and he caressed her in excitement as Valka flapped around him, asking in a mix of Norse and Dragonese, "Who?! Who?! [These new
people love Mama, I am excited~!"

Everyone eventually calmed down enough for Hiccup to introduce them all to each other, and then Hound had an introduction of her own to make. She called eagerly to a Gronckle fledgling who was huddled behind a rock, peeking out fearfully at the two humans.

"Ohhh," Hiccup breathed, and knelt to make himself smaller. "You found your baby, Hound! One of them, at least? You found him, oh, look at him...."

Hound had to go over and forcibly shove her yelping offspring toward Hiccup, but at last, Hiccup was stroking thick Gronckle hide and the fledgling was wriggling with pleasure, lifting his chin for Hiccup to reach the more sensitive skin there. "He's beautiful, Hound, look at him...oh, poor thing...." He stroked his fingertips over an old scar in the young dragon's flesh.

Valka was jealous. "Me too, Mama!" Then, trying out the sound-name her mother had been trying to teach his hatchlings, "Dad! [Pet me!]"

Hiccup had only just started to oblige, one hand for each young dragon, when Finn tromped up and laid himself right across Hiccup's lap, shoving aside both his sister and the young Gronckle as he did so. "Me first. I am more important."

"Seriously, Finn?"

Later, when the alpha returned home, Hound and Reign immediately pledged themselves to him, wanting to be part of his flock. The Bewilderbeast was delighted to find that they had known and loved his little Hiccup from before, though he was distressed at the circumstances. "These human cages.... He rescued you, sacrificed himself to set you free-- No. His babies, his precious things. They took them away from him--" He was thinking out loud through the alpha/flockling link, so the two new dragons made the connection along with him.

"This good good kind king-hearted person, threw away his precious things to save us, lost his things he loves most so we would be safe...!"

To be continued....
"Fishlegs's family" subplot

Carried Off, a DreamWorks' How to Train Your Dragon fanfic by Raberba girl

"Fishlegs's family" subplot (rough draft)

A/N: I'm bad at coming up with Viking names and I'm mentally exhausted tonight (the OCD was bad today DX), so I'm just going to use temporary names for Bunny's mother and siblings in the rough draft.

0.0.0

Bunny always knew that she was a princess, because her father called her one and treated her like one. Her mother was his big princess, and she was his little princess.

For three and a half years, she was perfectly secure in this knowledge. Then one of her playmates, Valka, a year older than her, punched a crack in Bunny's foundation. "NO! I get to be the boss because I'm the chief's daughter! I'M a real princess, you're just a commoner!"

Bunny didn't know words very well back then, and she didn't like to hit, but she was very upset, so she threw herself down on the ground and screamed and kicked her feet and beat her hands on the dirt. Valka climbed onto her back and gave her orders as if to a pack animal, so Bunny reared up and threw her off and ran sobbing to her father, who hugged her and comforted her until she felt better.

"You know, technically she's not a princess. She might be chief one day, but I'll always love you best, Bunnyrabbit."

Bunny felt better, and the crack healed a bit...but not completely.

As Bunny grew older, she realized unhappily that despite her father's ardent love, nothing could change the fact that Valka really was indeed royalty on Berk, and in the eyes of everyone other than Fishlegs, Bunny was simply one of the kids. Nothing special. No one but her father seemed to see anything remarkable about her, so she started to think that maybe he was mistaken, that maybe she was just ordinary and worthless after all.
She didn't dwell on this too much, however, because she would much rather play with her sister.

Bunny was excited at first. She eagerly watched her mother's belly grow, helping her father measure her every day, both of them talking to the little baby hidden inside. She helped her father take very good care of her mother as the baby grew, and she gave up portions of her food without complaining so that her baby brother or sister could have it instead and be born strong and healthy.

Her parents were careful to hide their anxiety from her, so she didn't see her mother weeping in her father's arms late at night, terrified at the coming ordeal. {Ella}, overly eager to marry her hero, had been only 15 when she'd given birth to her first child, and Fishlegs's best reassurances and most diligent research and most tender accommodations did little to ease her mind now that she was experiencing pregnancy a second time.

When the labor pains finally came, Bunny's excitement turned to dismay and fear. Her mother was screaming and crying and cursing her father, and her beloved father looked so anxious and upset. Someone took Bunny away, and she miserably ate as much as she was allowed and then she slept.

When she woke up, she was relieved to find herself in her father's arms, being carried home, and she was even more relieved to see him beaming with joy. "Daddy!"

"Bunnyrabbit! Ooooooohhh, guess what, guess what, princess! You have a brand-new baby sister!"

"Oooh! Is Mommy okay?"

"Yes, yes, Mommy is brilliant, she did an amazing job and she's resting now, oh, Bunny, I'm so happy!"

{Ella} was drowsing in bed with the new baby snuggled against her skin, but she opened her eyes and smiled at the sight of her husband and eldest daughter.

"Mommy!"

"Hey, Bunny...come here and meet your sister."
As Bunny climbed onto the bed and cooed over her tiny sibling, Fishlegs joined his family and encircled all of them with his arms. "You did it," he whispered to his wife.

"You were right...it wasn't as bad as last time...."

He kissed her forehead. "I'm so glad."

"Maybe we can have another one after all."

His eyes lit up. "Really?!"

"Not anytime soon."

"Yes, yes, of course! Whatever you want, Big Princess."

"Daddy," Bunny spoke up, "if Mommy is Big Princess and I'm Little Princess, what's she?"

"Hmm...Bitty Princess?"

"Oooh!"

The baby, {Jenny}, grew up even more doted on than her sister had been. Bunny was an attentive, sometimes smothering second mother to her little sibling, and {Jenny} often chafed at the expectations and restrictions she felt burdened with. Although only two years old when her mother became pregnant again, she still felt relieved when the attention shifted away from her, though she wasn't sure why her mother was suddenly so much more interesting to everyone than before.

She also didn't know why her parents and sister were so upset five months later, when Mommy got sick and her big tummy wasn't big anymore. {Jenny} was frightened by her family's grief, so she crept away and played happily with the other children until her father managed to call her home for supper without the sound of tears in his voice.

{Jenny} loved her sister, but she liked playing with one of the other older girls better. Valka didn't
treat her like a baby. Valka talked to {Jenny} as if she was one of the big girls, too, and gave her tasks and sent her on missions that made {Jenny} feel important. Yet Valka had no sympathy whenever {Jenny} got hurt or scared or sad, and {Jenny} eventually learned when it was better to play with Valka and when it was better to go to Bunny for comfort and protection.

Bunny was nine and {Jenny} was six when their little brother was born. Bunny burst into tears of relief when this one came out whole and healthy, with loud screams and reaching hands and kicking feet. "He's alive, Daddy?! He'll stay alive?!!"

"Yes, Bunnyrabbit, oh, look at him, oh, he's amazing, I love you, I love you all...!"

The year after that was a terrible year. {Ella} wasn't worried when {Jenny} didn't come home one evening for supper, and laughed at her husband and eldest daughter for being so anxious.

Then hours passed, and {Jenny} never turned up, and {Ella} couldn't find her anywhere, and she became as anxious as the other two.

Bunny was worried sick. She refused to go to bed and leave the search to the adults; she bundled up warmly against the chill of night and looked for her sister with grim determination, calling until she was hoarse.

{Jenny}'s body was eventually found, floating in the cave where she must have drowned at high tide. Her loss was a harsh blow to her family - it was not the first child Fishlegs had lost, but he had never gotten to know his firstborn son, whose weak lungs had not lasted long outside the womb.

To lose {Jenny} nearly killed him. He could not stop thinking of her sweet little face, her voice, her smiles and her laughter, the way she furrowed her brow and stamped her foot when she was angry, the feel of her arms around him when she wanted a hug, the way she imitated her parents' turns of phrase, the dreams and hopes for the future that she would chatter to him with confidence....

Fishlegs's heart felt strained, broken, overflowing with a thousand memories of the beloved daughter he would never see again. He went through his work and chores in a complete daze, only touching reality when his wife or his eldest daughter or his baby son called for his attention. He wept at odd times, not noticing who might or might not be around to witness. His wife comforted him and covered for him when he was not up to a task; his daughter wept with him, the two of them sometimes spending whole hours embracing without speaking. His oblivious little { Robin} was the only thing that made Fishlegs remember that the world outside his shell of grief was still as real as ever, that there were some people who were still experiencing life as usual.
That was the same year that one-year-old {Robin} fell sick. His illness terrified his family, and they dropped everything to tend to him, desperate not to lose yet another child. Fishlegs spared neither time nor expense, and was eventually rewarded with {Robin}'s slow but steady recovery.

They didn't realize the effects of that illness until later. {Ella} thought, to her dismay, that her surviving son had been born a halfwit. She would call to him and he wouldn't respond, yet it wasn't out of spite, for he would startle and then smile in genuine innocence when she clapped her hands sharply in front of his face. He would look at her with amiable confusion when she scolded him; he exhibited a strange combination of disobedience and affection. She didn't have the heart to punish him when he offered no defiance, and she eventually found that he would obey if she caught his attention and beckoned, or mimed whatever task she wanted him to do.

{Ella} found out that she was pregnant again soon after her son was weaned. Overwhelmed by terrible memories, she denied it even to herself until she started showing physical signs of her condition, and then she broke down.

"{Ella}...princess, it will be all right, we'll get through this--"

"No! NO, Fishlegs, I can't do it anymore, I can't do this anymore, I didn't know it would be like this, no, you're never allowed to touch me again, you're not allowed! This one will die like all the others did! I can't STAND IT, Fishlegs!!"

Whether that child would have survived on its own or not was never known. When Fishlegs lost his wife before she came to term, his despair was so great that he could hardly get out of bed; his eyes were so blurred by tears that the first arrow for her funeral pyre went wild. He wanted to die himself, and the only thing that kept him on his feet was the knowledge that his two remaining children still needed him.

A year after the death of Fishlegs's wife, Astrid cautiously broached the subject of remarriage with him, trying to be sensitive even as she felt the anxious need to boost her dying village's population. It was no use - Fishlegs couldn't bring himself to even consider marrying anyone or siring more children. He would never stop feeling the soul-deep pain of losing his family; he could never subject himself to risking that pain yet again.

{Robin} never did learn to talk. He would grunt and screech and babble nonsense, but no matter how hard anyone tried, they could never get him to speak intelligible words.
Bunny fiercely defended him from the bullying of the other children, and when he was three years old, his father finally determined that he was deaf. After he had proved this, many of the villagers were more generous about forgiving the child's strangeness. Fishlegs and Bunny, working hard to teach {Robin} without sound, soon became convinced that he was no more lacking in wits than they were. No one else seemed to agree, but at least the disparaging comments about the youngest Ingerman child were more subdued.

Finn rounded the corner, lost in thought, then came to an abrupt halt. [Thirteen-year-old] Bunny was sitting on the ground, hugging her knees to her chest and crying.

They stared at each other for a minute. Then Bunny's face crumpled and she cried, "I hate your stupid sister!!"

"Uh...." Finn shifted uncomfortably. "You had a tough day, huh."

Bunny wailed. Finn finally sighed and sat down beside her. He meant to put an arm around her shoulders, but she seized him before he could, hunching down and tilting him back a little so she could bury her face in his chest. He patted her awkwardly. "I'm sorry."

For a while, she cried and mumbled incoherently into his chest. He had to put both arms around her and lean his head against her in order to relieve the strain in his neck. Finally she lifted her head and he could hear what she was saying. "Why is she so mean to me?! I want to kill her sometimes!"

"Yeah. That's what she wants."

"...Huh?"

Finn sighed and explained, "She thinks you could be so cool."

"HUH?!"

"You're so big, and so--"
"I AM NOT FAT! DON'T CALL ME FAT!"

Finn lifted his hands placatingly, a little frightened because she was so big and strong and was now gripping him too hard. "I didn't. I said you're big, which you are-- Like Vikings are! Ow, Bunny, you're hurting me!" Her grip slackened a little, but she was still clearly upset. "You're impressive. Okay? She wants to be like you. Do you know how frustrating it is, being tiny in a village full of people who could crush us?"

Bunny sank back against the wall, looking like this had never occurred to her before.

"...Look, Bunny." Finn rolled up his sleeves, and she gasped at the finger-shaped red marks on his arms that would become bruises.

"Did I do that?!"

"Yeah," he said quietly. She reached out and gingerly touched a fingertip to one of the marks. Then she frowned and tugged his arm out to see the rest of it. "And these?!"

"Some of them are from work, but this one is from when [name] was...arguing with me about my pricing. And I've got a couple of sore spots on my back from people just saying hi."

"...It's the same with Valka?!!"

"Sort of. She gives as good as she gets, so people leave her alone more. But she has to fight for it, you know? To be recognized, to be respected. But people like you - you don't have to fight so hard, you know? You're so strong, and you just take it for granted, Bunny."

She was quiet a moment. "So she's jealous of me? That's why she picks on me?"

"No, that's not what I meant. She wishes she could be big like you, but she's not, so she works really, really hard so she can at least be strong. And it makes her mad when you can break things in your sleep and she has to work so hard to do the same thing, and she puts all her blood, sweat, and tears into training but then sees you not working as hard and then complaining about it...."
"But I don't want to work hard! She's crazy, practicing ALL DAY and then wanting to do more! Like it's fun for her!"

"It kind of is...."

"Does she thinks it's fun to constantly fight with me or something?!"

"Yes."

"...She does?!"

"You're a challenge, Bunny. You give her a good workout, and you look amazing doing it. She loves it."

Bunny buried her face in her hands and burst into tears again. When she'd finished crying, she hugged Finn (too tightly...), kissed his cheek, and thanked him.

"You're welcome."

Then she asked shyly for a 'real' kiss.

His mother's ultimatum loomed. It was going to be either Gruffnut or Bunny someday, and much as he shied away from the idea of either, he knew it was better to get used to it now than to keep putting it off and get forced into it later when he was less prepared. "...Just one. One."

She'd gotten better at it by now. She cradled his head gently between her hands and gave him a smooch on the lips that conveyed her desire without being sloppy or lingering too long. Then she left, happier, and he went on his way, thankful that it hadn't gone too badly and hoping that would be the end of it.

After that, Bunny tried to be nicer to Valka. She did notice it now, sort of, the way that Val's grins were more excited than vicious, but the insults still hurt. So did losing.
"I want to be strong!" Bunny burst out to her father in frustration one night.

"Oh, sweetie, you are strong," Fishlegs said soothingly. "Here, you can have some of this. It'll give you more energy."

He started trying to scrape some of the food off his plate onto hers, but Bunny gently pushed his hands back before he could. "No, Daddy. I know you're not hungry, but you need to eat." Her father had lost an alarming amount of weight in the two years since her mother's death, and it disturbed Bunny how little he ate now.

{Robin} made the particular grunt that was his version of his sister's name. When Bunny looked at him, he wrinkled his face in an exaggerated expression of worry and pointed to her.

"I'm okay, {Robbie}," she said, laying her hand over her heart and smiling. He frowned in dissatisfaction. She sighed and then started gesturing, speaking absently as she did so. "Valka [person out there], she's mean [angry, threatening]! [scares me] I want to get better [flexing my muscles]. It's hard, though [sad face]."

He flexed his muscles, too, but over and over again with a calm, slightly determined expression until she realized he meant, "Practice."

"I dooooo practice," she wailed, "but it's haaaaard!"

"Fun practice." This time he made a point to smile and make his unique laughing sound during the gesture.

"Fun? Like a game?" Then Bunny's face lit up as an idea occurred to her. "Bashyball! Daddy, you have to start playing bashyball with me - training bashyball, not fun bashyball!"

"Of course, princess."

{Robin} poked at Bunny's arm to get her attention, and she made a "throwing ball game" gesture. He smiled and vocalized in approval.
The plan worked. Bunny always enjoyed playing bashyball, but now she had a goal and was delighted to discover ways to make the game work for a specific purpose. She trained herself in stamina and agility, and started weighting the ball to strengthen her muscles as well. It was fun, it really was fun, and words could not express her delight the first time she beat Valka in a fight.

"You cheated! You *cheated!*"

"I did *not* cheat. I've been training just as hard as you, VALKA!" Bunny lifted her eyes, looking for Finn and his approval, and was extremely gratified when he smiled at her.

*To be continued....*

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