Shadow of the Night
by Superbun

Summary

'I'm sorry,' The last Night Fury thought, looking down at the boy beneath her. 'I don't even know your name, and I'm going to tear you away from your tribe and place the last hopes of an entire race on your wings.' - What if Hiccup was transformed into a Night Fury and then left to fend for himself? - Cross-post from FanFiction.Net

Notes

Friendly greetings!

This is my first story posted here on AO3, but I've been a member of the Fanfiction community over on Fanfiction.net for several years, you can find my older work and the most up-to-date version of this story over there at: www.fanfiction.net/u/2668930/

At time of writing, I started this story over a year ago, expecting to have finished it by now. However due to several life-induced delays and blossoming scope, I find myself 14 months and 60,000 words later at around two-thirds of the way through this tale.

I've lapsed on writing this story for a few months, so in the hope of motivating myself, I've decided to start re-posting this story over here at a rate of roughly one chapter a week, until we catch up with what I currently have written on FF.

Anyway, without any further adieu, I thank you for reading and hope you leave your
thoughts on the story in a comment.

~Superbun
Prologue: Prisoner of the Mind

Don't like reading? This prologue is also available on audio, check it out here!

Shadow of the Night

The unholy offspring of Lightning and Death itself glided above the human village of Berk on silent wings. Invisible, a black shadow against the midnight sky, she was fear given form, striking from the skies with deadly force, then vanishing into the darkness. Yet she was also a prisoner.

The northern catapult, destroy it.

She quickly located her target, and saw the humans manning it. Several nearby buildings were ablaze, there was no chance of her being spotted on approach. Not for the first time, she tried to will her tailfins to move, to carry her out to sea, away into the night. But her body was not hers; it belonged to the Queen.

She felt herself spark a fireball in her throat, then her wings folded of their own accord and she dove. At the last moment, the humans heard her whistling approach and leapt for safety as her shot reduced the catapult to splinters. She circled around and fired another shot, collapsing the tower that it had stood on.

Good, she thought, that should cripple the human’s defences on this side.

Wait, was that my thought, or hers? Sometimes it was hard to tell the difference.

For nearly as long as she could remember, the last Night Fury had been an instrument of the Queen’s will. Deep inside herself, she held onto a fuzzy memory of her and her parents flying over a vast ice sheet, emerald aurorae gleaming in the sky above them. It was almost all she had left of her kind, that and...

No, she told herself, can’t think about that, not while she’s paying attention. Quick, think about something else.

How did she know she was the last Night Fury? She had hunted them. The Night Furies had been the smartest and wisest of all dragons and had tried to fight the Queen. However, the slow-breeding Night Furies were overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of the Queen’s flock and the survivors of her race were driven into hiding. They had possessed a strange ability to resist the Queen’s power, so never suspected that one of their own was an agent of the enemy.

The pained screech of a Nadder shook her from her thoughts. A flying boulder had shattered all the bones in the dragon’s left wing, sending the young dragon spiralling to the ground. She watched, helpless as the mauve dragon crashed to the ground, and the humans cheered and pounced on her.

She felt sick. The whole war was a pointless, senseless waste of life. The dragons only attacked the humans because the Queen commanded it, and the humans only fought back because the alternative was extinction.

Her eyes narrowed as she located the catapult that had thrown the offending boulder. She might not be able to stop the war, but the least she could do was avenge her fallen comrades. She didn’t need the Queen’s command as she readied her fires and rolled into a dive. A grim sense of catharsis
filled her a moment later as she watched the catapult's fiery annihilation.

Distantly she heard a strange metallic twang followed by the sound of bolas rushing through the air.

She ignored the sounds, even if somehow she’d been seen, there was no way-

She cried out in pain and shock as something impacted her from the side, wrapping around her legs and tying up her wings. She struggled frantically against her bonds as she tumbled from the sky, but they held firm. A detached part of her mind observed it was fortunate that she carried most of her speed out of the dive, else she would have splashed down in the water and drowned.

Then the ground rushed up to meet her and everything went black.

The first sensation that returned was pain. Her head throbbed, and seemingly every scale along her back and right side ached from the impact. She focused on her flight surfaces: as far as she could tell, her wings were still tied up by the bolas, but thankfully her sub-wings and tail fins were still intact.

Her eyes opened. From her position on the ground, she could just make out that she was in a forest, lying in a crater formed by her impact. Pain lanced up her spine from her bruised muscles as her limbs suddenly thrashed and strained against her bonds. An involuntary cry escaped her throat before the Queen clamped her jaws shut.

*It’s no use. If the crash didn’t dislodge the ropes, nothing we can do is going to shift them.* She wasn’t completely certain that the queen could actually hear her thoughts, but in her darker moments, she spoke to her anyway.

A wordless roar of fury filled her mind, and her limbs strained even harder against the restraints. The last Night Fury silently cried out in agony as the ropes began to cut into her scales and her wounded muscles protested the abuse. At last, when she thought she must pass out from the pain, the Queen released her, and she slumped to the ground, gasping for breath.

The Queen hadn’t let her go completely, she could still feel her twisted presence on the edge of her consciousness, but for the moment, her body was almost her own.

*I suppose you think this is some kind of cruel irony,* she thought bitterly, *giving me control when I’m tied up and too battered to move anyway.*

As she lay there, contemplating whether she’d die of thirst before the humans found her, she noticed the sky between the leaves above her lightening. An irrational flare of hope bloomed in her chest. The raid would have ended hours ago and the humans would be too focused on rebuilding to watch the skies, a small group of dragons could...

*Don’t be a fool.* She told herself. The Queen didn’t care for her tools, even a useful one like herself. *Is this what I’ve been reduced to?* she wondered. *The last Night Fury alive desperately hoping that the architect of her race’s genocide will rescue her?*

The sound of a human voice drifted through the forest, and she froze, clamping her eyes shut. She heard the whistle of a tree branch whipping through the air, and the human cried out in pain. For a moment she hoped that it had been been knocked unconscious by the blow, but a few seconds later she heard footsteps approaching her, and then the beast’s scent washed over her. Judging by the muskiness of the smell, she thought that this one was a male.
He spoke again, and she took in a deep breath. Beneath the overpowering stink of the human, she could smell the furs and leathers that he wore, and a distinct odour of charcoal. She heard his clothing rustle and then scent of metal washed over her. The human continued speaking, and this time, she focused on his voice, it didn’t sound like the other humans she’d heard. Then she realised what she’d been missing. This human absolutely *reeked* of fear.

She felt a pressure on her left foreleg, and she involuntarily flinched, a moan of pain and fear escaping her maw. The human recoiled.

Suddenly overcome with a desire to see the face of her executioner, she opened her eyes.

He was a boy.

At its widest point, his torso was barely wider than one of her forepaws, and his arms looked like spindly twigs. Rather than a powerful sword or vicious axe, he clutched a small dagger in both hands. Her gaze drifted up to his face and met his eyes. She saw the uncertainty that resided there.

*So this is how the last Night Fury dies, shot down and helpless before a mere hatchling.*

*It’s what you deserve,* part of her whispered. *You’re weak, a slave and a traitor to your race.*

The human appeared to make up his mind and raised the dagger. She closed her eyes and laid her head on the ground. *It’s over,* she thought, waiting for the blow to come *I’ll finally be free.*

The blade never fell.

She heard the human turn away from her, a depressed murmur escaping his lips.

*Is that it!?* She raged silently, *Are you just going to leave me here to die!??*

The human moved back towards her and she felt a slight tug on one of the ropes restraining her.

The Queen was back in control before she even realised what was happening.

As soon as enough of her bonds were severed, she was up on her feet and throwing him back against a nearby boulder, a low growl rising in her throat.

Time seemed to slow down as she met his gaze for the second time, the positions of power reversed. She knew that he’d almost killed her, and should be glad to take her revenge, but all she could think was *he’d let her go.*

*He took pity on me,* she realised, *all these years of war, and this pathetic boy, this... talking fishbone was the first human to see us as more than a mindless beasts.*

She was so close that she could hear the human’s frantic heartbeats, the fear-scent rolling off him was almost overpowering.

*He could have done it,* she thought, *taught the humans that we’re more than mindless beasts, discovered that we’re being controlled, and ended the war...*

*No, not like this, he’s too weak, too vulnerable...*

*Maybe he still could, not as a human, but as...*

Her time was up. She felt her jaws part, and a fireball building in her chest.
It’s now or never. With that thought, the last Night Fury reached deep inside herself and drew on the final legacy of her kind. She located her reserve of Auric power - the one part of her mind the Queen couldn’t touch - and immersed herself in it, letting the light flood through her.

The Queen’s control shattered immediately, and her aches and pains faded as the power suffused her body. Moments later, she heard a roar of fury in her mind and felt her power drain as the Queen battered against it. She turned back to the boy beneath her. She had precious few seconds to accomplish what she needed.

I’m sorry, she thought, I don’t even know your name, and I’m going to tear you away from your tribe and place the last hopes of an entire race on your wings.

With that, she lowered her head and gently pressed her muzzle to his forehead. Closing her eyes, she drew on all of the power flowing through her and dumped it into him, willing his body to change, moulding it into the form he needed.

The boy let out a single gasp, his pupils widening to an unnatural size, then fell into unconsciousness.

She stayed long enough to see the first jet black scales break out on his skin, then leapt into the air, frantically beating her wings to get as far away from him as possible. With the last dregs of her power, she erased the memories of what she’d just done.

In her final moment of consciousness, she felt something she’d never experienced before; hope.

I’m not alone, she thought.

Then the light within her went out, and she snapped back into the Queen’s control, powerless to resist her will.
Chapter 1: Metamorphosis

“Okay, but I hit a Night Fury” Those had been Hiccup’s words. “It went down, just off Raven Point. Let’s get a search party out there, before...”

Astrid Hofferson slipped between the trees, moving with the silent grace of a warrior several years her senior. It was almost trivial for her to follow the Haddock heir without being heard, the boy had no battle sense whatsoever.

She wondered why she was bothering to tail him. It was extremely unlikely that the boy had managed to bring down the elusive Night Fury, but something about his pleas to his father had sounded so earnest, so sincere, that for a moment she almost believed him. It had been several years since Hiccup had last claimed to have brought down the most enigmatic of dragons, and after that incident Stoick had impressed into his son that untruthful boasting was not a good habit for future chiefs to get into. She highly doubted Hiccup would have gone back to his old ways.

Regardless, if by the will of the Norns, he had somehow managed to down a Night Fury, there was no way she was going to let the future chief of Berk face the beast alone.

Hiccup’s head was buried in his omnipresent notebook as he walked, muttering to himself as he scribbled on the page with a charcoal pencil.

Astrid darted from her hiding place, crouched behind a dense patch of foliage, and pressed her back against the trunk of a pine tree. Hiccup didn’t even glance up from his book. It’s amazing, she thought, he’s barely even paying attention to his surroundings. You wouldn’t think he was hunting the most dangerous dragon ever to plague Berk.

Hiccup snapped the book shut with a sigh of frustration. “Oh, the gods hate me,” He moaned. “Some people lose their knife or their mug. No, not me. I manage to lose an entire dragon!?” He angrily smacked at a low lying branch, and it whipped back at him, striking him in the face.

Astrid shook her head, suppressing a sigh. She didn’t hate him, not really. She could tell that he didn’t do what he did out of malice, just incompetence. It was better for everyone involved if he was kept away from anything important until he grew into something resembling a man.

She shifted to get a better view, and froze at the same moment he did, hand slowly reaching for the handle of her axe. Just in front of Hiccup, a deep trough was carved into the ground, as if a large object had been dragged through the soil. The track disappeared over a small ridge. Finally, Hiccup demonstrated some common sense and dropped to his hands and knees, crawling up to the edge of the ridge, while Astrid darted for the cover of a boulder on top of the ridge.

Hiccup suddenly let out a surprised gasp and she shifted her axe into a ready position before peeking out from her hiding place.

Lying in a crater formed by its impact, with bolas wrapped around its body, was a dragon. The beast’s scales were like shards of obsidian; its colouring was unmistakable, against the night sky it would be completely invisible.
By the gods! she thought, He actually managed it!

Hiccup fumbled around in his jacket and pulled out a dagger, nearly dropping the blade in the process. Seemingly gathering what little courage he possessed, Hiccup scrambled over the peak of the ridge and into the depression where the Night Fury had come to rest. He momentarily pressed his back against a nearby boulder, then approached the downed beast.

Astrid shifted herself into a ready position, her muscles tense and ready to spring. She wouldn’t deny the chief’s son the honour of killing his first dragon, but if he needed her help, she’d be there to provide it.

“Oh, wow. I did it. Oh, I did it!” He sounded as doubtful of his achievement as she’d been. “This fixes everything! Yes! I have brought down this mighty beast!” He placed his foot on the dragon’s upper foreleg. The Night Fury flinched, jerking its leg. Astrid nearly leapt from her hiding place, then remembered that the dragon was still restrained by the bolas wrapped around it.

Her fist tightened around the handle of her axe, knuckles turning white. So, it’s still alive.

Hiccup recovered from his shock and warily reapproached the dragon, holding the knife out before him.

The dragon let out an unnatural moan. She didn’t know if it was one of pain, sorrow, or some other, alien emotion.

Hiccup took several deep breaths, flipping the dagger over in his hands and preparing to strike. The point of the blade pointed downwards towards the underside of the dragon’s neck. Astrid nodded approvingly, one or two swift strikes and the menace would be dead.

“I’m going to kill you, dragon.” Hiccup began, his voice gaining in confidence. “I’m gonna cut out your heart and take it to my father. I’m a Viking. I am a VIKING!”

Not the most inspiring battle cry, she thought, but he can work on that.

Hiccup raised the dagger above his head. Astrid held her breath.

He stared down at the dragon for a long moment. He lowered the knife.

“I did this,” he murmured dejectedly, turning away from the dragon.

Yes you did, Astrid thought angrily. Now finish the job! She didn’t pretend to understand what went on in Hiccup head most of the time, but she decided he wasn’t leaving these woods until that dragon was dead.

She was about to step out from hiding when he suddenly turned and dropped to his knees beside the Night Fury. She shifted, trying to get a view on what Hiccup was doing.

The Night Fury was free before she could even react.

In a single motion, the dragon threw off its bonds and leapt to its paws. In the process it grabbed Hiccup and pressed him up against the boulder he had hid behind moments earlier.

Astrid froze, her axe half-raised. The dragon had Hiccup’s neck between two of its claws and was staring down at him intensely. There was no way she could get to him in time. She had no doubt the dragon would sense her as soon as she moved, and would have ample time to finish off Hiccup before turning to deal with her.
She forced herself not to look away as the Night Fury reared up, preparing its fires.

Suddenly, it shook its head and closed its mouth, choking off the building flames. The dragon blinked, and its eyes began to glow a brilliant, shimmering, emerald green. From between the eyes the light spread backwards, shining mutedly through the scales along its spine.

The dragon looked down for a beat, then leaned forwards and gently touched the tip of its nose to the centre of Hiccup’s forehead. The light shining through its scales flared brightly, then vanished, leaving only a barely perceptible shimmer in the Night Fury’s eyes. In the same moment, Hiccup cried out once then went limp beneath the Dragon’s claws.

A chill ran down Astrid’s spine. Something about that light, the way it had seemingly appeared from nowhere unsettled her. *What did it just do to Hiccup?*

The dragon stepped back and studied Hiccup closely, obviously looking for something. Then, without warning, it spun around and leapt into the air, flying away to the west like it was being pursued by Fenrir himself.

Astrid stayed where she was, adrenaline still coursing through her body. Hiccup moved unconsciously, his head falling such that he looked towards her. Astrid gasped. At the centre of his forehead, at the exact point the dragon had touched him, was a patch of pitch black skin. The dark patch was visibly expanding, discolouring the skin around it. Hiccup shifted again, and as the light played across his face, she saw that what she had originally taken to be a single dark patch was in fact split into overlapping segments. With a sense of dread, she realised what they were; dragon scales.

Transfixed in horror, Astrid watched as the patch of scales began to spread. His hair fell out in clumps as the scales spread upwards, past his hairline. At the same time, his head began to morph, it grew in size and flattened, becoming large and spade-shaped. His eyes more than doubled in size and migrated towards the side of his head, while his nose melted into the flesh around it, leaving a pair of slitted nostrils. His mouth widened into the deadly maw of a dragon, and the skin of his jaws rippled as his teeth grew into razor-sharp fangs.

As the wave of scales spread to his torso, his arms morphed, becoming short and stocky, the dextrous fingers of a smith transforming into powerful claws. Alongside these changes, a new pair of limbs sprouted from his shoulders, bursting through his ruined tunic. The thick leading edge of the wings grew out first, followed by the fingers that gave them shape. For a moment they looked like a pair of misshapen hands growing from his back, then the wing membrane filled in between the fingers.

As the scales spread lower, his chest began to swell with new muscles, tearing his clothing to shreds. A large pair of fins sprouted from his hips as legs warped to match his new forelegs. The last change was his tail. It pushed out from the base of his spine, writhing back and forth like a snake until it made up almost a third of his body-length. Finally, another set of fins unfurled almost gracefully from the tip of the tail.

At last, all was still.

Astrid slowly rose from her crouch, staring down from the ridge in shock and disbelief. Lying on the ground before her, where the heir to the chiefdom of Berk had been a few minutes earlier was a Night Fury.

Cautiously, she slid down the bank and approached the dragon, axe at the ready. Now that she was closer, she could see that he wasn’t identical to the beast that transformed him. His body appeared
to be less muscular, and his limbs seemed slightly longer than they should be, proportionally. If she didn’t know better, she would almost have described this Night Fury as lanky.

Astrid gritted her teeth. In front of her was her people’s greatest enemy, her instincts told her what she had to do. She raised her axe. She’d let one Night Fury escape already, there was no way she would let a second one get away.

She couldn’t do it. Until a few short minutes ago this had been Hiccup. For all she knew his mind might still be in there. He may have been the village nuisance, but by his blood alone, he was owed her respect, and her life in battle should it be asked for. So, she couldn't, no, she wouldn’t kill him while there was a chance that the Hiccup she knew lived on in this dragon’s body.

The Night Fury that replaced Hiccup groaned. Astrid started. He’s waking up!

She span around. If she was wrong about him, she did not want to be nearby when the dragon woke up. She looked back, hesitating. If this wasn’t Hiccup, she’d never get another chance like this. If it took off, she knew she’d never see it again.

The dragon groaned again, its eyes twitched beneath their scaly black lids.

Muttering a prayer to the gods, Astrid ran for the cover of the trees.

The first thing Hiccup realised was that he wasn’t dead. Then he noticed that he wasn’t in pain either. He paused, why was he expecting to be hurt? His mind felt strangely slow and fuzzy, and he had to struggle to recall what had happened before he passed out.

He remembered finding the downed Night Fury in the woods. He’d been about to kill it, when he’d met its intelligent gaze, and seen the fear and understanding in its eyes. Then it had lowered its head, accepting its death and accepting him as its executioner. In that moment he’d discovered that killing a defenseless, intelligent creature wasn’t in his being. So he’d set the Night Fury free, and as soon as the ropes holding it loosened, it had pounced on him. He’d seen the glow of the Night Fury’s fire building in it’s throat, and thought that was it. Then it seemingly changed its mind and touched its muzzle to his head. Then... nothing. He remembered brief, indistinct flashes of light, filled with alien sensations, then he was waking up again.

What did it do to me? he wondered. He’d never heard of a dragon being able to render someone unconscious by touch, but, then again, nobody had ever shot down a Night Fury before.

Deciding his memories weren’t going to help, Hiccup opened his eyes, then shut them an instant later as the light from the unnaturally bright sky stabbed at his retinas. He rolled over onto his front and tried again, he had to blink a few times, but eventually his vision swam into focus. The sun had barely risen above the horizon when he’d set out to search for the Night Fury, now the forest was lit by the bright midday sun.

He tried to stand up, but his body didn’t move the way he expected, and he fell flat on his stomach, winding himself. Taking several deep breaths, Hiccup managed to push himself up onto all fours, and look around. He was still in the gully where he’d found the crashed Night Fury, the remains of his bolas were lying on the ground a short distance away, but there was no sign of the Dragon. Well, there goes my only chance of getting a date, he thought morosely.

He turned his head from side to side, still unable to shake the feeling that his body wasn’t moving correctly. At the extremes of his neck’s motion he noticed a strange sensation of something rubbing at the space between his shoulder blades. As he considered this, he suddenly became
aware of two things that seemed to be above and behind his shoulders. He closed his eyes, concentrating on the new sensations. Almost of their own accord, he felt unfamiliar muscles in his chest and back twitch, and the things on his back moved.

Hiccup’s eyes shot open and he looked down, straight at his black-scaled paws.

An incoherent cry escaped Hiccup’s lips as he recoiled. He winced in pain as he overbalanced and fell backwards, landing awkwardly on his new appendages. Gasping for breath, almost hyperventilating, he clamped his eyes closed and rolled back onto his front. He forced himself to take several deep breaths, then slowly opened his eyes. Again he saw the hideous visage of a pair of scaled paws where his hands should have been. His spindly arms had become short and thick, his fingers replaced with claws as black as the scales that covered his arms. A dragon’s claws.

“Oh gods, no,” Hiccup murmured, but the only sound that escaped his lips was a low series of grunts and growls. He unconsciously flinched at the sound of his voice - the voice of a Night Fury.

Okay, I might have the arms of a Dragon, he reasoned desperately, and I apparently sound like one too, but that doesn’t mean that I...

Then it clicked, the new limbs he could feel, behind his shoulders, they were wings. If he had wings, then- He spun around. As he turned, he noticed something long and black move at the edge of his vision. He had a tail. He was a dragon.

He’d thought the gods had hated him when he couldn’t find the dragon he’d shot down. Now he realised that was too benevolent an action for the evil creatures his people worshipped as gods.

They’re not your people any more, a small part of him whispered. A chill ran down his spine, if anybody from the village saw him like this, they’d kill him without a second thought. His father would murder his own son without ever knowing what he did.

A slight rustle of movement caught his attention, and he span around, heart thumping in his chest. The sound had come from behind a boulder on the peak of the ridge. Slowly, a blonde haired figure stood up from behind the rock, a vicious two-handed axe held at her side. Astrid.

“Hiccup?” She asked uncertainly.

Hiccup did the only thing he could; he turned and ran. Or at least he tried to. He managed a couple of steps before he tripped over his own feet and landed flat on his face. Heart still pounding in his ears, he frantically scrambled to his feet and tried to run again. After his second fall, he realised that things seemed to go better if he didn’t focus too hard on how exactly his legs moved. He was hardly graceful, he frequently stumbled over raised roots, and his tail dragged along the ground behind him, smacking painfully into tree trunks as he turned. Even Bucket could have followed his tracks as he forced his way through the undergrowth, but he didn’t care, all he could think of was the numerous ways that she knew to kill him.

Hiccup silently cursed. He tried to glance back, but his neck wouldn’t let his head turn far enough to see behind him. Of all the people on Berk why did it have to be her, the deadliest teen on the island, if not the whole Loki-cursed archipelago, that found him? If she wasn’t already in hot pursuit, she was probably running back to Berk to fetch a hunting party and do the job properly.

Hiccup was so intent on fleeing that he didn’t see the drop coming until it was too late. He shoved through a curtain of low-hanging branches and suddenly the ground dropped away beneath his feet.

For the briefest instant, instinct kicked in, and Hiccup’s wings opened, slowing his fall. For a
moment, he was gliding smoothly through the air. Then he slid off to one side and doused himself tumbling through the air. He landed hard, ploughing a mirror image of the furrow in the forest above into the ground.

Hiccup lay still for moment, stunned by the impact. When, at last, his head stopped spinning he rolled right-side up and clambered to his feet. He flexed his legs, then, remembering that he now had more than four limbs, closed his eyes and concentrated on moving his tail and wings. He was briefly amazed that nothing was broken, then he reasoned that the Night Fury had survived its crash-landing in the forest with no obvious injuries, so he should easily be able to shake off the short drop from the cliffs.

Looking back up to where he’d fallen from, Hiccup strained his ears, listening for any signs of pursuit. He could hear a symphony of rustling leaves and bushes coming from the forest, and the sound of water gently lapping against something behind him, but no sounds of Astrid. At least something’s finally going my way, he grumbled. A songbird suddenly burst into song, and Hiccup flinched, the bird sounded like it was right next to his ear. He glanced upwards, and his eyes zeroed in on a small Wren perched on a branch overhanging the cliff. He was amazed by the quality of his eyesight, he could almost pick out individual feathers on the bird’s chest.

Well, it makes sense that Night Furies would have better senses than humans, he thought, glancing up at the sky. The sun was still low in the east, he couldn’t have been unconscious for more than a quarter of an hour. Judging by how bright the sunlight had appeared, he’d assumed it must have been close to midday, now he realised that his eyes were much more sensitive to light than they had been.

Turning away from the cliffs, Hiccup surveyed his surroundings. He had landed in a roughly ovoid space, surrounded on all sides by steep cliffs. A small lake took up about two-thirds of the area, on the far shore, a small waterfall tumbled down the cliffs, refreshing the lake’s waters. In a few places, hardy-looking shrubs sprang up from cracks in the walls and boulders that littered the ground, but for the most part the floor was carpeted in a layer of tough grass.

Hiccup took a deep breath, and suddenly his nose was assaulted with a thousand different scents. He could pick out the musty odour of the earth beneath his feet, and the stone walls that surrounded him, he could even identify the smell of the water in the lake, but a multitude of other scents drifted to him from the forest that he had no clue about. He blinked several times. Okay, going to have to get used to that, he thought, padding over to the shores of the lake.

He was expecting it, but it was still a shock to look down at the water and see a dragon staring back at him. He tilted his head from side to side and bared his teeth, examining his reflection from different angles. Several flaps extended from the back and sides of his head, the largest of which were just behind where he thought his ears were.

“Well, that explains another mystery” Hiccup remarked, trying not to flinch at the dragon-sounds coming from his mouth. Unfortunately, Hiccup’s natural curiosity about his body could only carry him so far, and as he stood there studying his reflection, the severity of his situation began to dawn on him. He slowly raised a hand - or was it a paw now? - to his face, and watched as the Night Fury in the lake mirrored his actions. He closed his eyes as his paw travelled across the unfamiliar structure of his face. He lowered his paw and slumped to the ground with a depressed huff.

There was no denying it, somehow he’d been transformed into a dragon. He’d been forced in the body of his people’s arch-enemy, with no knowledge of how to use his newfound wings and tail, or defend himself should his friends or - gods forbid - his father stumble across him.

Even if he knew how, could he fight his own people? They were Vikings, they faced down whole
packs of much more skilled dragons than him on a regular basis, nothing he could do would make them retreat. If they found him it would be a fight to the death, he would either die, or be forced to kill everyone he had ever loved.

Hiccup’s life had always been hard, he didn’t fool himself by pretending otherwise. Despite that, he’d always prided himself on taking what the Norns dealt him with dignity, and making the best of his situation. However, at that moment, lying in the forest, trapped in a body he didn’t understand and unable to return home on fear of death, he did something he hadn’t done in a long time;

he wept.

Chapter End Notes

Norse Mythology:
The Norns - Norse version of The Fates from Greek mythology.
Fenrir - A monstrous wolf and son of Loki, foretold to kill Odin during Ragnarök.
Chapter 2: Contact

“Welcome to Dragon Training!”

_This is it_, Astrid thought, stepping under the portcullis into the arena. “No turning back.”

The other new recruits - Fishlegs, Snotlout, and the Twins, Ruffnut and Tuffnut - followed her into the amphitheatre, idly discussing the battle scars they hoped to get from training. “Yeah, it’s only fun if you get a scar out of it” she put in when the conversation paused.

She glanced at up at the steely grey sky as they formed a line in the centre of the ring. _If you’re out there somewhere Uncle Finn, this is for you. I’ll show them that the Hofferson family is still worthy of the name ‘fearless’._

“Let’s get started!” Gobber’s voice shook her from her thoughts. “The recruit who does best will win the honor of killing his first dragon in front of the entire village.”

“Hiccup already killed a Night Fury, so is that why he’s not here, or...?”

Astrid carefully kept her expression blank while the rest of the group chuckled at Snotlout’s comment. Nobody in the village was particularly bothered by Hiccup’s apparent disappearance - he’d disappeared before and always shown up again eventually. Regardless, with most of the village focused on repairing and restocking after the dragon raid, Stoick didn’t have people to spare on search parties for his son. Of course, Astrid knew what had really happened to him, and that this time he wasn’t going to be coming home anytime soon.

“Behind these doors are just a few of the many species you will learn to fight!”

Astrid shifted her grip on her axe and dropped into a slight crouch. She pushed away all thoughts of Hiccup. In battle, distraction meant death.

Gobber began to slowly pace around the circumference of the ring, calling out the names of each dragon species as he passed its cage. “The Deadly Nadder! ... The Hideous Zippleback! ... The Monstrous Nightmare!”

After each name, Fishlegs muttered some indecipherable statistics that only made sense to him. She quickly tuned him out. Her body remained perfectly still, her eyes tracking Gobber as he approached the final cage.

“The Terrible Terror!” Gobber announced. “And... The Gronckle!”

Gobber rested his hand on the lever that opened the Gronckle’s cage. Snotlout made the mistake of stepping out of line. “Whoa, whoa, wait!” he exclaimed. “Aren’t you gonna teach us first?!”

She simply readied herself to spring into motion.

“I believe in learning on the job,” Gobber replied, and with that, he unleashed the Gronckle. It burst out of its cage and flew straight across the arena, causing Astrid and the other trainees to scatter. It smashed into the far wall, then dropped to the ground, gobbling up some rocks knocked free by its impact.
“Today is about survival. If you get blasted, you’re dead!” Gobber shouted over the drone of the Gronckle’s wings, finally beginning his instruction. “Quick! What’s the first thing you’re going to need?”

“Plus five speed!” Fishlegs shouted.

This isn’t a game, Fishlegs! She thought angrily. “A shield!” she answered, already moving to grab one leant against the wall of the arena. She quickly slipped her arm into the strap and spun around, eyes darting back and forth across the arena. Snotlout was slipping his arm into his own shield, while Fishlegs was running for a shield on the far side of the ring, ignoring several that lay on the ground closer to him. Gobber was still stood by the cage door, espousing the importance of the shield in the art of dragon fighting.

She watched as the Gronckle as spun lazily towards Ruffnut and Tuffnut, who had gotten into a fight over one of the shields. It spat out a fireball, which struck the shield they were wrestling for, knocking both twins to the ground.

“Tuffnut, Ruffnut, you’re out!” Gobber yelled.

Astrid glanced over Fishlegs; he’d finally managed to pick up a shield. Together with Snotlout, the three of them began to slowly advance towards the dragon, herding it towards the centre of the arena.

“Those shields are good for another thing: noise!” Gobber advised. “Make lots of it to throw off a dragon’s aim!”

Astrid began banging the head of her axe against her shield. The others quickly mimicked her, spreading out to surround the dragon, she watched as it it blinked and shook its head, clearly disorientated.

“All dragons have a limited number of shots,” Gobber continued. “How many does a Gronckle have?”

“Five?” Snotlout guessed.

“No, Six!” Fishlegs corrected.

“Correct, Six! That’s one for each of you, and two left over!”

The Gronckle launched another lava-ball, but the shot was high, it flew over Fishlegs’ head and burst against the far wall. Fishlegs flinched and stopped banging his shield. Seeing it’s opportunity, the Gronckle span fully towards him.

“Fishlegs, move!” Gobber ordered.

The boy let out a very unmanly shriek and ran for the far side of the arena, narrowly avoiding the Gronckle’s second shot.

“Three shots left!” Gobber called out.

Astrid cursed under her breath, with just the two of them, they couldn’t corral the dragon effectively. She tried to circle around to attack the dragon from behind, but it was wary, and she ended up stood next to Snotlout, as they both stared down the Gronckle.

“So, anyway,” Snotlout said, “I’m moving into my parent’s basement. You should come by
sometime to work out.”

Ugh. I’d rather kiss Hiccup than spend time with you. She thought, then she had an idea. He may be a lout, but he could still be useful...

Turning to him, she flashed her best smile. “You look like you work out,” she winked. “Go get ‘em, you Viking.”

Snotlout blinked at her for a second, then let out a furious battle cry. Raising his weapon above his head, he charged straight towards the Gronckle, and straight into another fireball. The force of the blast almost knocked him back to the arena wall.

“Snotlout! You’re done!”

Astrid hadn’t expected Snotlout’s mad charge to work, but it had distracted the Gronckle long enough for her to get into position. Letting out her own battle cry, she raised her axe above her head and sprinted forwards.

The Gronckle reacted faster than she thought possible. It span, swinging its mace-like tail towards her. She managed to get her shield up in time to catch the blow, but it still knocked her backwards several feet, skidding on the damp stone floor.

“You know,” Fishlegs complained to Gobber, “I’m really starting to question your teaching meth-” He was cut off as the Gronckle’s third shot at him finally connected squarely with his shield, knocking it clean off his arm and sending it rolling across the arena.

“One shot left!”

Foolishly, the boy ran after his shield, and grinning viciously, the Gronckle gave chase. At the last moment, Fishlegs looked back. With a gasp of horror, he realised it was too late for him to escape, and in his panic, tripped and fell. Flipping over, he scrambled backwards, pressing himself against the arena wall as the Gronckle closed in.

Suddenly, Gobber was at the Gronckle’s side, hook-hand lodged in its mouth, as its final shot exploded against the arena wall, inches away from Fishlegs’ terrified face. “And that’s six!”

“Go back to bed, you overgrown sausage!” He grunted, wrestling the dragon back into it’s cage, and slamming the doors closed behind it.

Astrid let out a breath, and slowly trudged towards him. She glanced over at the Twins and Snotlout as they approached from the edges of the arena, but said nothing.

“You’ll get another chance, don’t you worry,” He said, finally addressing the five of them. Turning to help Fishlegs up he added, “Remember: a dragon will always, always, go for the kill.”

Astrid knelt on the rim of the shallow crater where the Night Fury had crash-landed after Hiccup had brought it down. She’d intended to work off her frustration by throwing her axe into some trees - she’d been so close to that Gronckle - but before she’d realised what was happening, her legs had taken her back here.

Gobber’s words from the end of the training session echoed in her mind. A dragon will always, always, go for the kill.

“So why didn’t you?” she wondered out loud, absently picking up one of the balls from Hiccup’s
bolas and weighing it in her hand.

The Night Fury had Hiccup beneath it’s claws, she’d seen it preparing to end him with a burst of fire, then it seemingly changed its mind and transformed him instead.

*Why would it do that?* she thought. Was it simply trying to sow chaos on Berk by changing the chief’s son into a dragon? Or was this how Night Furies reproduced?

*No, that doesn’t make sense,* she answered herself, *If Hiccup was its ‘child’ why would it fly away as soon as it transformed him?*

“And where did you go?” she asked, looking up from the ground. She’d seen the newly transformed Night Fury’s reaction to the change when it woke up, the horror and panic had been obvious even on a dragon’s features. *That has to mean it’s still Hiccup in there, right?* But then she’d stood up and called out to him, and he’d fled.

She shook her head, there were just too many unanswerable questions. The Night Fury had obviously used magic to transform Hiccup; there was no other explanation. If Night Furies could use magic, could other dragons? Had the Night Fury used its power to free itself from Hiccup’s bolas?

She stood up, The path ‘Hiccup’ had carved through the undergrowth when he fled from her was clearly visible, leading away into the forest. There was only one way that she was going to get any answers.

She needed to find Hiccup, or at least the Night Fury that had replaced him.

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Hiccup was awoken by the morning sun shining through the leaves above him. He blinked confusedly at the bright light, disorientated by not waking up in the body he’d possessed for his previous fifteen years of life. All too quickly the memories came flooding back, it hadn’t been a dream; he was still stuck in the body of a Night Fury.

His first day as a Night Fury had been downright miserable. A storm had blown in by late morning, and he’d been forced to spend most of the day sheltering beneath the buttress-roots of a large tree that grew from the cliff wall, flinching whenever a crash of thunder made his too-sensitive ears ring.

Hiccup stood up and groaned, his muscles were stiff from sleeping on the bare ground. The storm had finally blown itself out sometime in the night, and he’d eventually slipped into a fitful sleep. He glanced up as he padded out from his shelter, The sky was still thick with clouds, but the sun shone down through a narrow rent in the stony grey ceiling, dazzling blindingly off the droplets of water that clung to every leaf and blade of grass.

Hiccup opened his mouth in a large yawn. Of their own accord his front legs pushed forwards and his hindquarters rose into the air, his body stretching like a cat. He almost jumped in surprise when at the peak of his stretch, he felt his teeth retract back into his gums.

Relaxing his body, he wandered over to the shores of the lake and parted his lips, looking down at his reflection. Sure enough, he was as toothless as a baby.

“Huh,” he said out loud, baffled by this new development.

After about a minute of pulling increasingly contorted faces into the lake, he was able to locate the muscles above and below his jaws that moved his teeth and snap them back into place.
Hiccup sighed and sat back on his haunches, staring out across the surface of the lake. He could feel the despair and hopelessness that had washed over him the day before threatening to overwhelm him again. With an effort of will he forced down his emotions and locked them away. If he was to have any chance of surviving this... this, he couldn’t spend all his time lying around feeling sorry for himself, he had to try and learn what he could about the body he now possessed.

Getting to his feet and closely studying his reflection in the lake, Hiccup slowly extended his wings. As he did so, he felt the rest of his body move in response, his tail automatically lifted from the ground, the fins at the end unfurling. Turning his head to the side, looking underneath his left wing and down his flank, he noticed another set of fins at the base of his tail that he hadn’t been aware of before. Experimentally, he moved his wings in what he thought was a flapping motion. Immediately the surface of the lake sprung to life, rippling due to the wind generated by even his first few slow flaps. Beating his wings harder, he felt his weight lessen in time with his downstrokes, but he still remained firmly rooted to the ground.

“Well it was never going to be that easy” he groused, folding his wings against his back - the new muscles in his chest and back ached from just that simple exercise. As he watched the ripples he’d created in the lake slowly spread out, he recalled how his tail fins had moved automatically when he’d opened his wings, and his mind drifted back to when he’d first fallen into the cove. He’d been too preoccupied to notice at the time, but his wings had instinctually opened to try and slow his fall.

When he thought about it, he realised that he had to be in possession of at least some basic dragon instincts. After his initial panicked attempts to flee from Astrid, he’d been able to adapt to walking on all fours without too much thought. Is that the key? he wondered, Do I just have to get myself into the right situation, then let instinct take over? He eyed the towering cliffs that protected his secluded hiding place, jumping off a high point and trying to learn to fly on the way down sounded like a surefire way of earning himself a premature trip to Valhalla. Or whatever dark corner of Hel is reserved for Dragons when they die, he added darkly.

He was saved from slipping into depression again by a loud growling from his stomach. It suddenly occurred to him that he hadn’t eaten at all the day before. He wondered why it had taken him this long to feel the effects; had some side effect of the transformation suppressed his appetite? Or was his new body simply able to survive longer without food?

Hiccup shook his head, trying to focus his thoughts. Now he had a goal at least; he needed to find food.

A soft splashing sound caught his attention, his ear-flaps suddenly standing at attention. Turning back to face the lake, he spotted a pair of fish swimming in the shallows, less than two feet away from his paws. His stomach growled. Crouching low, he crept forwards until the lake was almost lapping at his claws. He fixed his gaze on the larger of the fish, and lunged forwards.

At the last moment, his shadow fell across the fish and they darted away, his jaws closing on only water. Before he could react, his body recoiled backwards several steps and his head shook violently, spraying water everywhere.

What in Thor’s name was that? Hiccup thought, alarmed. Slowly, as if scared the water was going to bite him, he padded back to the shores of the lake. Then it hit him. He was a dragon, he could breathe fire - at least in theory - and he’d just gone and dunked his head underwater. Well, I’m an idiot, he thought. A newborn hatchling probably has more sense than me.

As if reprimanding him for letting his thoughts go off track, his stomach grumbled again. “Right, on it” he replied.
Hiccup let out a wordless growl of frustration as for the third time his paws splashed down on empty water. He’d made several more attempts at catching the fish in the lake - using his claws rather than his teeth - but every try had ended in frustration; he just wasn’t fast enough to grab the elusive fish.

Padding out of the water defeatedly, he looked up at the trees that encircled the rim of the cove. Hunting his own food was out, so his only option was to scavenge a meal from somewhere, which meant that first he had to get out of this cove.

He felt a numbing sense of foreboding creep over him as he studied the cliffs. The walls were almost completely sheer, vertical rock. His gaze finally came to rest on a narrow crack at ground level and he bounded over excitedly.

As a human, he might have just been able to squeeze through, but in his current form, he could barely fit his head into the narrow gap, let alone his shoulders. Sighing, he turned away from the crack and began padding around the base of the cliffs. Experimentally, he raised one of his forelegs and hooked a claw around a low-hanging vine. The vine gave way almost as soon as he rested his weight on it, landing on top of him and tangling itself in his head-frills. He shook it off with an exasperated growl.

Eventually, he completed his circuit of the cove and arrived back at his starting point. The walls were nigh on impassable all around. His best bet was a large boulder that had fallen against the side of the cove, its top rising to maybe a third of the way up the cliffside.

Walking over to the rock, Hiccup found that if he reared up on his hind legs he could just about get his forepaws on top of it. With a heave and a lot of scrabbling of claws he managed to clamber onto the boulder. With a deep breath, he studied the natural edifice before him. Up close the cliff was even more imposing than it had been from the ground, at least forty feet of vertical, faultless rock.

“Well, here goes nothing...” Hiccup muttered, crouching atop the boulder. He shuffled his hindquarters, trying to get his legs into the best position to spring from. The high jump had never been his event at the annual Thawfest - not that any of the events had been “his”. With a shake of his head and a final breath, Hiccup tensed his body, held the position for a heartbeat, then launched himself at the cliff.

Hiccup felt his claws dig into the rock, and for a single, hopeful, moment he dared to imagine that he might escape the cove. Then the stone crumbled under his weight, and he fell backwards, landing spine-first on the boulder he’d jumped from.

He groaned in pain, blinking rapidly to clear the stars from his eyes. Grumbling curses under his breath, Hiccup rolled to his feet - forgetting that he was currently lying on top of a boulder. A surprised cry escaped his jaw as he rolled off the side and tumbled to the ground, somehow ending up with a mouthful of soil in the process.

Rolling to his feet again, Hiccup spat out several clumps of grass and glared up at the treacherous cliff vehemently. "I don’t care if the Night Fury survived being shot down from ten times this height” he growled, "I am not doing that again!"

Hiccup could see the marks that his claws had left in the cliff face; he hadn't even made it halfway up. With a defeated sigh, he slowly sank back onto his haunches. He was stuck; he couldn't fly, and there was no way out of his prison on foot. He almost wished he hadn't run away from Astrid the day before. A quick death on the blade of her axe would have been preferable to the slow, miserable death by starvation that almost certainly awaited him now. Then, overcome by the sheer unfairness of it all, he did something he never thought he’d do. He reared his head back, opened
his jaws, and *roared*, letting out all of the frustration and helplessness he felt in one go.

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**CRASH! Crash! ROOAAAAR!**

Astrid froze, automatically dropping into a ready stance and raising her axe. Her eyes darted back and forth, searching for the source of the noise. It had sounded like something heavy hitting the ground, followed by an unmistakably draconic roar, and it had been close too.

She glanced down at the soil, Hiccup's tracks lead up to a thick wall formed of undergrowth and low-hanging branches. Without making a sound, she crept forwards. Part of her wondered what she was doing. She might be the best student in Dragon Training, but she knew her limits, and even an experienced warrior would think twice about engaging a dragon alone on unfamiliar ground.

*This is for Hiccup,* she reminded herself. She knew that if she told anyone in the village, they wouldn't believe her story about Hiccup being transformed - gods, she wouldn't have believed it if she hadn't seen it with her own eyes. If she'd spoken to anybody from Berk, they would have stopped listening at "Night Fury" and sent out a hunting party to unknowingly kill their chief's heir.

Hardly daring to breathe, she reached out and gently parted the undergrowth with one hand. She barely suppressed her surprised gasp at what she saw. Just beyond the wall of branches the ground dropped away into a secluded cove-like depression, if she hadn't been following Hiccup’s tracks, she would probably have never known it was there.

However, that wasn’t what caused her shocked exclamation; sitting in the middle of the cove - clear as day - was a Night Fury.

Hiccup was staring morosely at a birds nest in a branch overhanging the cove, when he felt his ear-flaps prick up. He hadn’t consciously noticed the sound - an almost imperceptible *swish* of movement amidst the rustling of the trees - but it had triggered some primeval instinct buried deep within him and he’d automatically risen to his feet, heart suddenly pounding in his chest. He closed his eyes and took a breath in through his nose, and was immediately assaulted with a multitude of scents. It took him a moment to filter through the vast amount of information. The scent was faint; barely a wisp of it had reached his nose, but that still enough to make the primitive part of his mind scream *danger*!

The predominant component of the scent was a faint musk of sweat, but it was layered with numerous other subtle odours. With a chill, he realised what it was:

Human. He’d been discovered.

Hiccup strained his ears, head darting from side to side, expecting a hunting party to leap from the cliffs and attack at any moment. After a few moments of sheer panic, he managed to reign in his emotions. He forced out a breath, which emerged as an agitated hiss through clenched teeth. *Get a grip!* He told himself, *You’re not that far from Berk, it’s probably just someone collecting firewood.*

He padded over to the tree where he had sheltered from the storm, and crawled into the space beneath its roots. However, the adrenaline in his system wouldn’t let him curl up and hide, and he found himself unconsciously clawing the ground underneath his paws. Letting out a sound somewhere between a sigh and a growl, Hiccup pulled himself out from under the tree, and began to pace the circumference of his natural prison.
By the time he finished his first lap, he’d almost managed to convince his nerves that he wasn’t in danger. Then he heard a clatter of rocks followed by a muffled curse from the crack in the cliffs he’d discovered earlier and his heart leapt back into his throat.

Hiccup looked around wildly. He couldn’t hide; The tree he’d sheltered under was on the other side of the lake, and everywhere else he’d stand out like a sore thumb, a black dragon against grass and pale stone. His gaze fell on the boulder he’d launched himself off previously, from its top he’d have a good view of whoever came through the crack, and the height might give him an advantage if it came to a confrontation.

He managed to scramble on top of the rock moments before Astrid emerged from the gap in the cliffs. He pressed his stomach to the rock as she warily stepped out into the cove. His eyes darted to the blade of her axe; she held the weapon at her side one-handed, not in an overtly aggressive posture, but still ready to be brought to bear if she felt threatened.

“Hiccup?” She called out uncertainly.

Hiccup pressed himself tighter against the boulder, it seemed she hadn’t noticed him yet.

“Are you there?”

He took in a shallow breath through his nostrils. As best he could tell, Astrid was alone, and that struck him as odd. Astrid was many things, but stupid or foolhardy weren’t among them. There was no way on Midgard that she would walk into any dragon’s lair - let alone one belonging to a Night Fury - alone.

At that moment, something about her sudden appearance the previous morning finally occurred to Hiccup. He’d been so focused on getting away from her, that he hadn’t stopped to consider why she was there in the first place. Had she been following him?

Did she see what happened to me?

A small spark of hope ignited in Hiccup’s chest. It was a long shot, but if she’d seen what had happened, and realised that he was still himself underneath the scales, it would explain her uncharacteristic behaviour. Or she could just be trying to win favour with dad by bringing the head of a Night Fury back to the village, his pessimistic side countered. He’d never understood it, but for as long as he could remember, Astrid had been almost unhealthily obsessed with warrior training, even for a Viking; She seemed to treat Dragon Training as some kind of do-or-die rite of passage.

He shook his head, raising his stomach from the stone. Well, its either this or starve to death, he told himself, padding forwards until he felt his claws begin to skid on the rock, then dropping to the ground.

Astrid let out a soft gasp and span around. Hiccup's heart clenched and they both froze as their gazes crossed. The next moment seemed to stretch out infinitely as they stared each other down, neither of them daring to move. Eventually, Hiccup managed to wrestle back control of his limbs and cautiously took a step forwards. His movement seemed to set Astrid free, and she recoiled backwards several steps, bringing her axe up between them.

Hiccup half-opened his mouth, then froze. How could he communicate with her? His voice box was no longer capable of producing human words, and she couldn’t understand his dragon-speech.

“Hiccup? Is that you?” Astrid asked tensely.
Letting out a shaky breath, Hiccup sat back on his haunches and nodded his head up and down in an exaggerated motion.

She jerked in surprise. “Great Odin’s ghost!” she exclaimed. “You can understand me?”

Hiccup nodded again, feeling the spark of hope in his chest grow - this might actually work!

“Gods above...” she muttered. Then, seemingly struck by a thought she narrowed her eyes. “Wait a moment, how do I know you’re really Hiccup, and not just a dragon trying to trick me?”

Hiccup felt his blood go cold, and he nervously eyed the razor-sharp blade of her axe. “You’d think the fact that we’re having this conversation and I’m not trying to claw your face off would be a big hint,” he muttered.

Astrid stared at him blankly for a moment. “Right, yes or no questions only,” She began. “Are you really Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the third, son of the Stoick the Vast?”

Hiccup nodded his head. Yes.

“Do you have any siblings?”

He shook his head. No.

“You’re the village Blacksmith’s apprentice, correct?”

Yes.

She thought for a moment. “Did you shoot down the Night Fury - I mean, the one that transformed you?”

He nodded again.

“Do you know why it changed you?”

He shook his head.

Astrid went quiet and in the silence that followed, Hiccup’s stomach growled again.

Hiccup sighed inwardly, he could see the doubt in her eyes; they could do this all day and she wouldn’t be convinced. Making what he hoped was a non-threatening sound in his throat, he crouched as low as he could and slowly crept forwards, practically crawling along the ground towards her. She started, raising her axe slightly, but held her ground. He took a step forwards, then another. The wind shifted, and he was suddenly hit with the full strength of her scent. His dragon instincts sprung to life, screaming at him to get away!

This is it, all or nothing.

Closing his eyes, he let out a soft croon, and extended his neck, touching his nose to the ground in front of her. My life is in your hands, he thought. Either trust me, or end it now. He heard Astrid’s breath catch and everything went silent, the sounds of the forest receding as he tensed, awaiting the blow that never came.

After what felt like an eternity waiting in darkness, Astrid let out a noisy sigh, “Hiccup...” she breathed.

He opened his eyes, she was staring down at him in a mixture of shock and disbelief, her axe
hanging forgotten at her side. He let out a sigh of relief and sat back on his haunches. He looked
down at his paws, he’d been so tense that he’d unconsciously sunk his claws into the ground,
leaving a collection of puncture marks in the soil. *That’s it!* he thought, resisting the urge to smack
himself in the face. *By the gods, I am an idiot!* 

He raised his left paw from the ground, and clenched his fingers as best he could, leaving a single
claw extended. Astrid eyed his paw warily as he lowered it back to the ground and began to scratch
runes in the first.

‘ASTRID’ he wrote. ‘IT’S ME.’
Chapter 3: Instinct

‘ASTRID, IT’S ME.’

Astrid looked down at the runes scratched into the dirt in a mixture of shock and disbelief. When she’d set out from the Night Fury’s crash site she’d been confident that her chief’s heir still lived on in the body of a dragon. However, when she had finally confronted the Night Fury - no, Hiccup - in the flesh, all her certainty had vanished.

Then Hiccup had all but prostrated himself on the ground before her, and the truth had hit her with the force of an angry gronckle.

Astrid sighed and ran her free hand down her face. From as soon as she’d been able to pick up a weapon, she’d strove to learn everything she could about the art of warfare. Yet, in all her years of training, nothing could have prepared her for the situation she found herself in.

Hiccup glanced between his runes and her face. His gaze met hers and she looked into his eyes, his expressive, hopeful, almost human eyes.

“Hiccup...” she repeated his name. “What happened to you?”

Hiccup snorted. She knew the question sounded stupid, but her mind was still struggling to accept what was happening as fact.

‘I GOT TURNED INTO A DRAGON’ he wrote. She’d never seen a dragon roll its eyes before, but somehow Hiccup managed to replicate the human gesture.

That comment erased any remaining doubts she had about the dragon’s identity. She might not have known the chief’s son well, but his sarcastic streak was unmistakeable.

“And you have no idea why the Night Fury did this to you?” she confirmed.

Hiccup’s wings twitched in a gesture she interpreted as a draconic shrug, then he nodded his head at her.

Astrid thought for a moment. “How did you do it?” she asked eventually. When Hiccup tilted his head sideways, she clarified “I mean, bringing down the Night Fury, in all seven generations of Berk’s history, nobody’s even seen one.”

And lived to tell the tale, at least. A small voice whispered inside her.

‘I BUILT A DEVICE THAT LAUNCHED BOLAS’ Hiccup scratched in the dirt. ‘I GOT IT JUST AFTER IT HIT THE EAST CATAPULT - ITS FIRE GAVE ME ENOUGH LIGHT TO SEE IT’

“Using it’s own strengths against it,” she commented approvingly, “That’s smart.” It might be buried deep, but it appeared there was a warrior’s mind hidden somewhere inside Hiccup’s skull after all.

Hiccup’s jaw dropped and he stared at her like she’d suddenly grown a second head. ‘THANK
YOU’ he hastily scrawled.

“Okay,” she said, ignoring his strange reaction. “That explains one thing, but how did the Night Fury get free? It looked to be tied up pretty good when you found it, and it must have lain there all night, why did it wait until you showed up to break free?”

Hiccup looked down at the ground, and shuffled his paws in what she would have sworn was a nervous gesture.

“Hiccup, what happened?” she pushed.

He looked up at her. The brief rapport they’d built up had almost vanished, he looked almost as frightened as when she’d first appeared in the cove.

‘I LET IT GO’ he wrote with a shaking paw. ‘I LOOKED DOWN AT IT AND I SAW MYSELF - IT WAS AS SCARED AS I WAS’

Astrid stepped back, turning away to hide her reaction. Hiccup had always been strange, an outsider, but she’d never suspected him of being a dragon sympathiser. She suddenly saw his situation in a new light, ‘Sympathise with the enemy, and you become the enemy’ was an old Viking saying; Had the gods made it literal as a form of ironic punishment?

She turned back towards the Human-turned-Night-Fury, a half-formed response on her lips. Before she knew what was happening, she found herself on the ground beneath an obsidian paw, looking up at the slitted pupils and bared teeth of a feral beast.

Hiccup stared apprehensively at Astrid’s back as she took in the meaning of his message. He forced himself to take a shallow breath. As always, the breath was accompanied by an onslaught of olfactory information.

_Earth, stone, water, sweat, textile, metal...  

FOOD!_  

It all happened in less than a second. His stomach contracted painfully, and he sprang. Astrid gasped as his weight suddenly fell on her, driving her to the ground. His nostrils flared as he homed in on the pouch hanging from her belt. He easily tore the leather with his teeth. The smoked herring within had barely touched the ground before he snatched it up and swallowed it whole.

Hiccup froze, the realisation of what he’d just done slowly dawning on him. In that moment of hesitation, Astrid moved. Her fist connected with the side of his head, knocking him off balance enough to slip out from under his paw. Before he had recovered from her first blow the flat of her axe impacted the other side of his skull, knocking him to the ground.

Hiccup’s head spun, and he swayed as he hastily scrambled to his paws, but he was too late. In the moment he’d been stunned she’d vanished into the crack in the cliffs.

Hiccup sat back on his haunches, staring after Astrid. As the pain from his head faded, it was replaced by a leaden numbness. “Well now you’ve really screwed up” he told himself, “The one person in all of the nine realms who wouldn’t have killed you on sight, and you attack them for a mouthful of smoked fish. Wow, Snotlout was right, it takes effort to mess up that badly.”

The worst part of it all? The fish hadn’t even sated his hunger. If anything, the small taste of food
had just made him more hungry.

“DAMN IT ALL!” he roared at the heavens, his vision blurring as tears welled up in his eyes.

He swayed on his feet. “I can’t…” He’d already broken down once, and it had taken almost all of his willpower to drag himself out of it. He knew that if it happened again, this cove would become his grave. He needed something to occupy him.

Rising to his feet, he turned and clambered atop the boulder he’d been standing on earlier. With a roar of pure emotion, he launched himself at the cliff face.

He barely felt the pain when the rock inevitably gave way beneath his claws and he fell heavily to the ground.

Astrid’s stomach growled at the tantalising scent of roasted meat as she ascended the steps towards the great hall. She hurried up the last few steps and slipped into the cavernous hall, thankful to escape the persistent drizzle that fell from the leaden skies. She was early; the hall was still fairly quiet. Crossing to the kitchens at the back of the room, she collected a plate of food and a tankard of ale and sat down at the nearest empty table.

She raised the tankard to her lips and downed half of its contents in one go, soothing her parched throat. She’d ran almost all the way to the edge of the forest, and her body had been crying out for a drink since then. Letting out a relieved sigh, she set down the drink and ravenously attacked her food.

As she ate, her thoughts drifted back over what had happened in the forest. She’d found Hiccup, and had even managed to hold a conversation of sorts with him, and then out of nowhere he’d attacked her. It didn’t make sense, one instant he’d been totally unthreatening, then the next moment, it was like he wasn’t there at all and she was dealing with a wild dragon.

Had she been wrong about him?

“Hey Astrid! Where’ve you been all afternoon?”

Ruffnut’s voice startled her from your thoughts. “In the woods,” she answered offhandedly, “Training.”

“Pity, you missed Snot and Tuff get into a fight over who’s going to kill the Monstrous Nightmare”

Astrid looked up at met her friend’s gaze. “They’re wasting their time.” she replied with utter certainty. “I’m killing that dragon.”

“I don’t doubt that, but it’s still fun to watch” the twin replied, sitting down opposite her. “Wow, Astrid, did you miss lunch or something?” she added when she saw the remains of Astrid’s meal.

“Yeah, you know what it’s like with training, I totally lost track of time,” she lied.

“So, where do you think Hiccup is?” Ruffnut asked between bites of her own meal.

Astrid almost choked on a mouthful of ale. “Probably got lost hunting for trolls or something,” she replied, forcing herself to sound casual. “Who knows what goes on in his head?”

A gust of cold wind made the torches that lined the walls flicker, and Astrid looked over her shoulder to see the unmistakable silhouette of Stoick the Vast in the doorway. The chief quickly
made his way over to the side of the room where Spitelout, Gobber and a few other Vikings had been poring over several charts spread out on a table - likely planning for the upcoming nest hunt.

“Shh” Astrid hissed, cutting off whatever Ruffnut had been about to say. She strained her hearing to pick up what the chief was talking about.

“... The ships are ready to sail chief, but-” Spitelout said.

“But what, Spitelout?” Stoick interrupted. “If the ships and men are ready, then we sail on the morning tide tomorrow.”

“What about Hiccup?” the second-in-command asked.

For a long moment Stoick was silent. “We sail tomorrow, Spitelout.” He ordered emotionlessly, “Inform the men.”

“At once chief!” Spitelout nodded, then quickly left the hall.

Stoick turned to Gobber as the other man left, “How are the repairs from the last dragon raid going?” he asked.

“They’re comin’ along nicely,” the smith replied. “We should have ‘em done by tomorrow or the day after. Of course it would go quicker if my apprentice decided to show up for work...”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about,” the chief replied in a heavy voice.

“Oh...”

“As soon as the repairs are finished, I want every able-bodied man left in the village looking for Hiccup. Understand? Tear up the whole forest if you have to, just find him.”

“And if we don’t find ‘im?”

Stoick’s reply was as cold as ice; “You will find him.” With that the chief walked past his friend and headed for the rear of the hall.

“Wow, the chief seems really shaken up” Ruffnut observed.

Trying to ignore the cold sense of dread that had settled between her shoulder blades, Astrid looked up. With a shock she realised she’d been so focused on eavesdropping that she hadn’t noticed Tuffnut, Fishlegs and Snotlout joining them.

“It makes sense,” Fishlegs put in, “Hiccup is Stoick’s only son, if he’s not here, then our next chief would be...” He trailed off as every eye at the table turned to look at Snotlout.

“I don’t get it” Tuffnut muttered.

“He’s Hiccup’s cousin, you idiot!” Ruffnut exclaimed, punching her twin in the head, despite the metal helmet he wore.

“So Astrid,” Snotlout drawled, interlacing his fingers and placing them behind his head, “How do you feel about being a chief’s wife?”

“It’ll be a cold day in Muspelheim before that happens,” Astrid muttered.

“Lesson two of Dragon Training,” Gobber announced suddenly, knocking Snotlout's helmet with
his hook-hand, “Never, never, let your guard down.”

Snotlout spluttered and quickly sat at attention, followed by the rest of the group.

“I ever tell you kids how I lost my arm?” Gobber continued.

Astrid inwardly rolled her eyes, she’d heard at least three versions of this story, all completely from each other.

“It was many years ago,” he began, adopting a storyteller’s whisper “I was transportin’ a captured Monstrous Nightmare that we’d bartered from another island. They must have used rotten ropes to tie the beast down, because we were halfway to the ring when he broke free! The fools hadn’t fed the thing for the whole sea journey, so the first thing it did when got out was take a bite out of the closest living thing; my arm! With one twist, he took my hand, and swallowed it whole, then took off, never to be seen again. Before he left, I saw the look on his face: I was delicious! He must have passed the word, because it wasn’t a month before another one of them took my leg.”

“I swear, I'm so angry right now!” Snotlout growled. “I'll avenge your beautiful hand and your beautiful foot! I'll chop off the legs of every dragon I fight!”

“Nuh-uh,” Gobber replied, “It’s the wings and the tails you really want, if it can’t fly, it can’t hunt, and it can’t get away; a downed dragon is a dead dragon.” He paused for a moment, to let his words sink in. “Anyway, you’ve got better things to than listen to my old war stories.” He produced a leather-bound tome from behind his back. “This is the Dragon Manual, it contains everything we know about every dragon we know about…”

Astrid tuned him out, his previous words echoing in her mind.

‘Hadn’t fed the thing for the whole sea journey…’

‘…First thing it did when it got out…’

‘If it can’t fly, it can't hunt’

‘A downed dragon is a dead dragon.’

It suddenly occurred to her that Hiccup had left to find the Night Fury immediately after the dragon raid, meaning he probably hadn’t eaten since the day before. That was now two nights ago, and if it was really him inside the dragon’s skull, he probably had no clue how to use his new body, which ruled out him getting his own food. He’d been almost unhealthily thin beforehand, and coupled with whatever strain the transformation had put on his body, by now he was probably starving.

The bench scraped noisily as she abruptly stood up, every face at the table turning to look at her in surprise. “I need some air” she muttered.

Cool drizzle moistened Astrid’s face as she stepped outside. The great oak doors boomed shut behind her, cutting off the sounds of the hall. Astrid sighed, brushing her bangs out of her eyes. Her heart was torn. She remembered several long, cold winters, when the harbour had frozen solid and the fishing ships had been unable to sail, when her family had teetered on the brink of starvation. She knew firsthand the desperation that hunger brought.

However, part of her remembered his written confession from earlier, he’d had a dragon - their ancestral enemy - helpless before him and had willingly chosen to let it go. And not just any dragon, she reminded herself, a Night Fury, the unholy offspring of Thor and Hel herself. He was a
traitor, and a dragon; seven generations of Viking tradition demanded only one fate for him.

Stoick’s conversation with Gobber in the hall replayed in her mind. For a brief moment she’d seen something unthinkable in her chief; weakness. She shook her head, Stoick was the unshakeable foundation that the village was built on, if he was removed, Berk would undoubtedly fall.

She let out another sigh, realising what she needed to do. Berk needed its leader, and Stoick needed his son, which meant that Hiccup had to survive long enough to find a way to get him back.

Astrid rose before the sunrise the next day. She’d barely gotten any sleep the previous night, going over the details of her plan, and her rationalisations for her actions over and over again.

Heart pounding in her chest, and hardly daring to breath she smoothly rolled out of bed - she had slept in her clothes. Picking up her axe from where it leant nearby, she cracked open the door with her spare hand. Pausing outside her room for several tense moments, listening to see if her movements had disturbed her parents or brother. When she heard no sounds but soft snores and the whistling of the wind outside, she let out a noiseless breath. Silently, she padded down the stairs, keeping her feet close to the wall to prevent the boards squeaking.

Despite her efforts, the penultimate step creaked as she placed her weight on it. The sound was deafening in the predawn silence. She froze. When nothing stirred within the house, she quickly descended the last step and slipped out the front door.

Fingers of frigid mist swirled between the houses of Berk in the predawn light. All was quiet. Astrid let out a soft sigh, feeling herself relax slightly, the most difficult part of her plan was over. Turning, she set off towards the docks at a brisk pace. She knew that she had limited time, when the sun rose, the harbour would be full of fishermen preparing for their daily voyage and warriors setting off on the Nest Hunt. However, she forced herself not to run and to walk openly down the main street, rather than darting between houses; she couldn’t afford to appear suspicious if someone happened to glance out their window at the wrong moment.

She silently thanked the gods when she made it to the fish storage warehouse and slipped inside without meeting another soul. She quickly located a basket of second-rate fish and hurried out of the building. Taking a breath to calm her beating heart, she slung the basket over her shoulder and began the hike back up the ramps to the village.

A few early risers were moving through the village when Astrid crested the final ramp. Thankful for the concealing mist, she skirted the edge of the village and hurried into the relative safety of the forest.

Astrid slumped against a large pine just past the edge of the trees, closing her eyes and taking several deep breaths. What am I doing? a voice whispered in her head. She’d spent her whole life working to become the model Viking, yet here she was sneaking around and stealing much-needed food, to feed a dragon.

No, not a dragon, she reminded herself, Hiccup.

Even so, could she justify stealing food for him? In their last meeting he’d admitted to having sympathies for their ancestral enemy. She shook her head, perhaps she’d been too hasty in branding him a traitor. Hiccup had always been somewhat of a dreamer, he didn’t share her intimate, visceral understanding of the war, he didn’t know the true horror that their warriors faced in a raid.
“It’s too late to go back now, anyway” she thought out loud, as she pushed away from the tree.

She’d memorised the location of the Night Fury’s crash site from her previous two trips and quickly found the small clearing, and from there retraced her steps to the narrow pass between the cliffs that led into the secluded cove.

Maneuvering the bulky fish basket through the narrow crack in the cliffs was an awkward chore, and Astrid’s nerves were strained by the time she stepped out into the Cave. She held her axe at the ready in her right hand and the strap of the fish basket in her left, ready to drop it and defend herself in an instant.

Hiccup was lying in almost the exact same spot that she’d last seen him in.

“Hiccup?” She asked cautiously.

The frills along the side of his head twitched at the sound of her voice, but the boy-turned-Night-Fury’s eyes remained closed. Astrid cautiously took a step towards him, distantly realising she was probably the first Viking to catch a dragon sleeping. As she examined him closer, it looked more like he had collapsed out of exhaustion rather than choosing to sleep out in the open. His wings were splayed out on either side of him, and his left foreleg was folded awkwardly underneath his body, in a position that couldn’t be comfortable, even for a dragon. Hiccup twitched in his sleep and her gaze was drawn to his right forepaw. His claws were caked in grey-white dust. She glanced up at the cliff behind her and saw a multitude of scratch-marks roughly halfway up the rock face. Was he trying to climb out? She wondered.

A soft rustle of scales jolted her from her thoughts, and she whirled around as the sleeping Night Fury began to stir.

Dull, constant pain dragged Hiccup unwillingly back to the waking world. He let out a pained groan, not even trying to open his eyes. Every part of his body seemed to hurt; his leg muscles were strained from repeatedly throwing himself at the cliff, and his back was painful and stiff from too many heavy landings, and his stomach still twisted painfully with hunger. To top it all off, the cold of the previous night’s rain seemed to have seeped into his bones, making his joints ache like an old man’s.

Gritting his teeth, Hiccup wrenched his eyes open, and blinked in surprise at Astrid standing a few paces away.

They stared at each other silently for several heartbeats. Eventually Astrid shook herself out of it.

“Hey Hiccup,” she said, “I brought you something to eat.”

He didn’t notice the basket that she held in her other hand, until she placed it on the ground in front of her and kicked it over. The lid of the container came loose as it toppled, and it deposited a mound of raw fish onto the ground with a wet squelch.

Eugh, that’s disgust- Before he could even finish the thought, his body rose to his feet and lunged at the pile. His mouth opened and he snagged the first fish he saw with his teeth; and with a single motion he threw his head back and swallowed it whole. No sooner than the first fish had disappeared down his throat, his head was lowering to pick up the second, and then the third, and fourth...

For an unknown amount of time, all Hiccup saw and smelt was fish, and all he felt was an
overpowering urge to gorge himself, accompanied by a sense of satisfaction that grew with each fish that disappeared between his jaws.

When he regained his faculties, Hiccup found his head lodged inside the fish basket. He sat back on his haunches, and the basket came with him. With a jerk of neck tossed it to one side, he blinked rapidly at the sudden light.

Only then did he realise that the basket was empty. He looked down at his paws. Where a few minutes ago there had been a mound of fish large enough to feed a family for a week, there was only a patch of trampled grass and a few scraps of meat and entrails that had escaped his jaws.

He blinked several times and looked up at Astrid, who was clutching her axe in both hands and staring at him, a shocked expression on her face.

“Err, Hi Astrid” he mumbled awkwardly. Then, shaking his head he extended a claw and wrote in the dirt, ‘THANK YOU’. When Astrid remained silent, he added ‘I'M SORRY ABOUT YESTERDAY - I DON’T KNOW WHAT CAME OVER ME.’ That wasn’t strictly true; he had an inkling of what happened the day before and with the fish basket a few moments ago, but he refused to consider what that might mean for his precarious relationship with Astrid, or his ultimate fate should he remain a dragon.

Finally Astrid broke her silence, “Don’t worry about it” she said, stepping closer to him.

Hiccup cringed and unconsciously took a step backwards. ‘COULD YOU PUT THE AXE DOWN?’ he wrote ‘IT’S MAKING ME NERVOUS.’

She glanced down at the weapon for a long moment. “Okay,” she said softly, before slowly crouching and placing the axe on the ground. She stood up and stepped forwards. “For what it’s worth, I didn’t want to hurt you yesterday, I just...” She trailed off, but Hiccup knew how the sentence ended; she’d seen a dragon, and she’d attacked. It was an uncomfortable reminder of what would happen if anybody else stumbled across his hiding place.

“Truce?” Astrid asked, extending her hand towards him, palm-forwards.

Hiccup blinked at her outstretched arm. He knew that she probably had more weapons on her person, but she was offering him her trust, and he’d be a fool not to take it. Taking in a steadying breath, he lowered his head down to her level, then closed his eyes and gently pressed his nose into her palm. He held the contact for a long heartbeat, then pulled back, resisting the urge to rub at the area her fingers had touched.

He opened his eyes and looked down at Astrid, she was staring at her hand like she expected it to suddenly turn black and drop off.

*Given what happened to the last Viking to touch a Night Fury, he thought detachedly, That’s not an unreasonable concern.*

‘SO NOW WHAT?’ Hiccup wrote when Astrid wasn’t forthcoming.

“You stay hidden here until I can find a way to turn you back.”

“As simple as that,” Hiccup muttered sarcastically. ‘AND HOW DO YOU PLAN TO DO THAT?’

“I have no idea,” her eyes flashed fiercely, “but I will find a way.”

Hiccup resisted the urge to chuckle, if there was a finer example of bullheaded Viking
stubbornness he’d never seen it. Taking a deep breath, he scratched a question into the dirt:
‘ASTRID, WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS?’

Astrid tilted her head at him in confusion.

‘I’M A DRAGON,’ he explained, ‘YOU KNOW WHAT’LL HAPPEN IF YOU GET CAUGHT’

“It’s for the good of the village,” she answered simply.

This time it was Hiccup’s turn to look at her in confusion.

“I overheard some of the senior warriors talking in the mead hall,” she began, “The dragon raids are becoming more frequent.” She paused, letting the significance of her words sink in. “If Berk is going to survive we need a strong leadership, which means chief Stoick can’t be distracted by by looking for - or mourning - you.”

Oh gods, Dad, Hiccup thought; he’d been so wrapped up in his own problems he hadn’t even thought about how the village would react to his disappearance.

Astrid hesitated, brushing a stray lock of of hair away from her eyes, then continued in a low voice. “That, and I figured you must be close to starving after you tackled me yesterday... I couldn’t leave anybody like that, even if they’d been transformed into a Night Fury.”

Hiccup blinked at her. He’d begun to suspect that Astrid wasn’t even capable of feeling ‘soft’ emotions like compassion. ‘THANK YOU AGAIN’ he wrote.

A bird cawed loudly in the forest above, breaking the sudden silence and making both of them jump. Astrid glanced up at the sky and cursed softly.

“Hiccup, I’ve got to get back to the village, my dad wants me to help with repairing the Sjóknapa’s nets , and Gobber wants to run another Dragon Training session tomorrow.” her eyes dropped to meet his gaze. “I’ll come back as soon as I can, I promise.”

‘DON’T GET KILLED’ Hiccup wrote. He didn’t want to admit it, but his survival was totally dependant on her. If she decided to share the location of the cove, or didn’t come back with more food, he was as dead as if she took her axe to his neck.

“I’m not planning to” she replied, turning towards the exit of the cove - picking up her axe from the ground.

She paused just before the crack in the cliffs and glanced back over her shoulder. “I’ll be back, probably!”

“And I’ll be here, definitely.”

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The Unholy Offspring of Lightning and Death Itself was abruptly torn from sleep. In one moment she’d been curled up asleep on a ledge in the nest, and in the next she was on her feet, flexing her wings for takeoff. She blinked, disoriented as her conscious mind struggled to catch up with her body. Around her, the dragons of the nest rose and stretched their wings, all awoken by the same silent signal.

Without warning, an image appeared in her mind: An island village, it’s harbour guarded by a pair of stones crudely carved into the form of human gods that rose from the black sea. Of their own accord, her legs flexed and her wings drove downwards, driving her into the air. Her tail fins
flexed and she joined the thunder of dragons as they spiralled up and out of the mountain.

For a brief moment she felt a flicker of annoyance at the subversion of her conscious control, but the thought was swiftly dismissed. This was the way of the world; Her Queen commanded, and her body obeyed.

The dragons flew in a tight orbit around the nest’s peak, then smoothly split off into several sub-groups that arrowed away towards their destinations. There were no collisions, even as dragons passed within wing-lengths of each other, each member of the flock knew exactly where to be. The last Night Fury took her position at the head of her group as they winged their way into the darkening night.

The flock’s wings stilled as one as they neared the island, stealthily gliding in for the final approach. A strange sensation overcame the Night Fury as she looked down on the village, she felt like something momentously important had happened here, but couldn’t quite remember what.

**Attack. Now.**

All thoughts were pushed aside as the Unholy Offspring of Lightning and Death Itself beat her wings twice to gain height, then dove. The unmistakable whistle of her kind filled the air as she fell, and in response the panicked voices of the humans drifted up to her:

“Night Fury! Get Down!”

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**Chapter End Notes**

**Icelandic:**
Sjóknapa - Sea Rider (I'm told this is grammatically incorrect in Icelandic, but it sounds good to an English speaking ear, so I'm sticking with it)

**Norse Mythology:**
Muspelheim - The mythical Norse realm of fire.
Hel - The realm of the dead in Norse Mythology, presided over by a female being of the same name.
Chapter 4: Fire

A thin, rising whistle pierced Astrid’s dreams. Half asleep, she stared up at the roof with a mounting sense of dread, wondering what on Midgard could make that noise. A purple light flared, highlighting the cracks in the wood above her, and an instant later an explosion shattered the night.

In a blink of an eye, Astrid was wide awake and halfway out of bed. “Night Fury” she cursed, scrambling for her clothes.

Several more flashes of light - this time orange - lit the room while she hurriedly dressed, and snatched up her axe from its usual place.

The rest of her family were already in the main room of the house when Astrid rushed down the stairs. Her father was also dressed for battle, carrying his weapons of choice - the sword and shield. Her mother looked between the two of them, a solemn expression on her face. “Be safe out there,” she said, kissing her husband on the cheek, and pulling Astrid into a quick hug. “Both of you.”

“What about me?”

Astrid turned around to see her younger brother clutching the hand-axe that they used for chopping firewood.

“Not now Orvar,” her father growled, “Put that back!”

“But dad!” he complained petulantly, “I’m twelve years old! I want to fight with you and Astrid!”

“Orvar, do what he says.” her mother commanded.

His grip on the axe loosened and the head thudded against the floor.

“I know you want to fight, Litla Drekann,” Astrid said softly, taking a step towards her brother. She gripped the center of the axe’s haft in one hand and his his free hand in the other, guiding him into a basic two-handed ready stance. “But I need you to do something more important.” She released her grip. The axe wobbled, but he kept it aloft.

“What?” he asked breathlessly.

She placed a hand on his shoulder, “I need you to stay here and look after mother, so dad and I don’t have to worry about her when we’re fighting. Okay?”

Orvar nodded and opened his mouth to respond, but was cut off by the rising note of a war horn that rang out over the clash and clamour of fighting; the raid alarm.

“Astrid, we need to go”

With one last look at her brother, she turned to the door. “Right behind you, dad.”

Astrid followed her father out into the night. The night-vison torches had already been lit, and she could see several monstrous shadows flitting back back and forth in their light. Draconic roars and
Viking battle cries rang out through the darkness. The raid horn sounded again; two short bursts in quick succession - the signal for every unengaged warrior to fall back and regroup. Astrid took a deep breath, preparing herself for battle, and took off towards the sound of the horn.

A chill ran down Astrid’s spine as she and her father arrived at the village centre; the space before the mead hall’s steps was barely half full. She remembered previous raids when the staging area had been packed with defenders. How many warriors did Stoick take on his nest hunt?

“Is this all of us?” Gobber called from partway up the steps - with the chief and Spitelout away on the hunt, the smith was in charge of the village’s defence.

“Most of us, sir,” a voice replied, “Björn and Friðrik went after a Zippleback in the upper meadows, and Birgit is chasing a Nadder away from the fish warehouses.”

“Very well,” Gobber replied. “Hoark, What have we got?”

“Nadders, Gronckles, Zipplebacks, Nightmares,” the veteran scout hesitated, “and the Night Fury.”

A palpable chill went through the crowd of fearless Viking warriors at the mention of the mysterious demon of the night. Astrid heard a man next to her mutter a prayer to Thor.

“Right then you lousy lot!” Gobber yelled. “Are we sheep? Or are we Vikings?!”

The crowd roared back at him.

“That’s more like it!” he shouted, and then began barking out orders, dispatching groups to defend different parts of the village. Within a minute, the square had cleared, leaving only Astrid, Gobber and the other teens.

“Where do you want me, sir?” Astrid asked, stepping up to the aging smith. This could be her chance; with half the village gone, she’d finally get an opportunity to show her skills and reclaim her family’s honour.

“Fire duty,” he replied, glancing at her briefly, then hurrying towards his shop.

“What?” she exclaimed, “You’ve seen me in the ring, you know what I can do. You need me on the front lines!”

Gobber stopped abruptly and rounded on her. “What I saw in the ring yesterday,” he growled, “was somebody who almost got her friends get killed in a failed attempt to take down a dragon single-handed.”

Astrid took a step back, in all her years she’d never seen the usually jovial smith genuinely angry.

“Glory seekers aren’t an asset on the battlefield, Astrid, they’re a liability.” he continued. “Don’t become one. Fire duty. Now.”

Astrid stared wordlessly after the smith as he waddled towards his shop.

“What was that about?” Ruffnut asked, coming up behind her.

“Nothing,” Astrid growled, angrily sling her axe across her back. She glanced up at the flickering orange light on the horizon and turned to the rest of the fire crew. “Come on, Let’s get moving before half the village burns to the ground.”
Hiccup paced the confines of his cove prison agitatedly. He’d felt strangely lethargic all day, he’d assumed it was a consequence of his overexertion the day before, but then, as the sun slipped behind the cliff walls and the sky darkened his body woke up.

Then the dragons had flown over.

The first sign of their approach had been an almost subsonic chattering that made the frills on the sides of his head twitch. The sound was so low he’d almost thought he was imagining it, until he’d heard the whispering of wings and seen the dragons fly over his hideout. Even against the dark sky, his sensitive eyes could pick out their forms from the blackness. It was almost as if his gaze was subconsciously drawn to the the other dragons.

Less than a minute after the flock had flown over, the clash and clamour of combat had started. To his sensitive ears, the shouts and cries of pain sounded like he was right in the middle of the battle, rather than cowering miserably in the forest some distance away. Letting out a subconscious whine, he dropped to the ground and pressed his forepaws to the sides of his head in a vain attempt to block out the noise.

It took him a moment to realise the sound of rushing wings he heard was coming from nearby and not from the distant battle. With a jolt, he scrambled to his paws and spun around to see an emerald green Nadder coming in to land in the cove. It landed a couple paces away and gracefully folded its wings, looking him up and down.

Don't panic! he told himself, if it thinks you're another dragon it might not attack.

"So this is what the Night Fury hid from me" it said. Hiccup shuddered unconsciously at the voice, it wasn't just that it was coming from a dragon - he'd long suspected that they were intelligent and could communicate - there was something about the way the words almost echoed in his head and how his head-frills shifted in time with the sounds that felt wrong. “A full transformation,” the dragon continued. The voice was female, he thought. “I'm impressed, she must have been storing up her power for decades, waiting for the right moment.”

“Hello?” Hiccup wished his limited instincts included draconic social interaction. “Who are you? What are you talking about?”

The Nadder finally met his gaze, the great reptile’s slit-like pupils swelled and it adopted an almost sympathetic expression. “Oh, I'm sorry,” she said, “This is all new to you, this must be very confusing.”

“I-I don't know what you’re talking about,” he said, trying vainly to keep his voice level.

The Nadder’s eyes narrowed to slits and her tail-spines bristled. “You shouldn’t lie to me,” she growled icily. She blinked and suddenly the sympathetic expression was back. “I know what the Night Fury did to you” she crooned “I know that you're human, or at least you used to be.”

Hiccup sat back on his haunches with a huff. So much for pretending to be a dragon, he thought. He studied the new arrival curiously, she knew that he was a human, and yet she was still looking at him with that sympathetic expression, like she actually wanted to help him.

“Who are you?” he repeated.

“I am the protector of the dragons” she replied “I protect my flock from harm and guide them to the most prosperous feeding grounds.”

Hiccup blinked at the odd reply. “Can you turn me back?” he asked hopefully.
Other dragon bowed her head and crooned softly. “I’m sorry, I cannot,” she said regretfully, “My powers cannot help you; only the Night Fury can truly wield the Aür, and she used up all of her power transforming you.”

Hiccup’s legs gave out and he slumped to the ground. He was stuck in this godforsaken body. He would never see his father or his home again. He screwed his eyes shut and struggled not to cry.

“Perhaps this was for the best” The Nadder suggested gently.

Hiccup raised his head and glared at her. “Why would you ever say that?!” he hissed.

“You have been given the body of a Night Fury; you have the strength and agility of the most powerful of dragon species, and a lifespan a hundred times that of your human body. What is there to miss?”

“Oh, how about my family and my tribe?” He shot back acidly, “And what use is the body of a Night Fury if I don’t even know how to use my wings?”

“I can show you how.”

“Oh...” Hiccup went silent. His wings twitched unconsciously. Before that moment he’d only considered flight as an abstract concept - he was a dragon and had wings, he knew that in theory he could fly - now he actually considered the idea of him flying, soaring through the air and feeling the wind beneath his wings. With a shock he realised that there was a part of him - human or dragon, he wasn’t sure - that actually wanted to fly. “How is this going to work?” he asked, “You’re a Nadder and I’m a Night fury, Our wings aren’t even...”

“This isn’t my only body” the Nadder explained as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “I am here with you in this cove, but I am also still in the nest, and with every dragon in every raiding party. I possess the combined experiences of hundreds dragons.”

“Okay, that makes no sense,” he muttered, “but let’s do this. What do you need me to do?”

“Close your eyes and relax”

Hiccup thought that was a strange start to a flying lesson, but with a mental shrug he did as he was told. Immediately he felt a comforting warmth spread over him, and a vision of large cavernous space lit from below by a red light sprung into his mind. Distantly, he was aware of himself stepping forwards and bowing his head before the other dragon.

The Nadder bent her neck touched the tip of her beak to his forehead. Suddenly a bolt of red-hot pain shot through him and he jerked backwards. He blinked repeatedly and shook his head to clear the vision.

“What the Hel was that!?” Hiccup exclaimed.

“I apologize, I will be more gentle this time, now relax.”

She moved her head to touch him again and Hiccup shied away, “Wait. I’m not.”

The Nadder growled impatiently. “Do you want to fly or not, Night Fury?”

Hiccup took a deep breath, pain or no pain, being able to fly would mean he wasn’t reliant on Astrid for food and could escape if his cove was discovered. He nodded his head.
Almost before he closed his eyes he was filled with warmth again and the vision of the cave swam into his head. A draconic cry of agony rang out from the distant village and was abruptly silenced. Hiccup’s eyes shot open. The raid! He’d almost forgotten the reason why the other dragon was there. Suddenly a connection between two of her previous sentences dawned on him and his blood turned to ice.

“Wait a minute,” he burst out, scrambling backwards. “You said you were ‘with’ the dragons in the raid, and that you ‘guide them’ to the best feeding grounds. Are you the reason why they keep attacking us?”

“No, it is simply the way of things that compels them: those with power take what they desire from those without. As Dragons we are infinitely superior to the humans, and therefore they are prey. I merely guide my flock in fulfilling their nature.”

“No!” Hiccup snarled. “There has to be a better way! Humans are intelligent, and now I know dragons are too! There doesn’t have to be war, If we can communicate…”

“Enough!” The Nadder growled harshly cutting him off. “The raid has is nearly over, and we don’t have time to wait for your true nature to assert itself. Come here.”

Hiccup felt the strange heat again, but this time it was different; it seemed hotter, more akin to standing next to the open forge than a comforting blanket. His legs twitched and he had to fight to keep himself from padding forwards and curling up at the Nadder’s feet.

You have an impressive strength Night Fury, especially for one who has so recently undergone a traumatic experience. It took Hiccup a moment to realise that the Nadder was no longer speaking, but he could somehow still hear her words. Don’t fight your nature. Accept what you are, and become the most powerful of dragons.

Hiccup gritted his teeth and sank his claws into the soil, battling to keep himself rooted to the spot.

Let me in, and I’ll give you the power to take your revenge on the one who transformed you.

An image of the Night Fury appeared in Hiccup’s mind, tied up, helpless, and staring up at him with fearful green eyes. No, he thought. Even if he had the Night Fury before him at that very moment he wouldn’t do it. It wasn’t very Vikingly, but he just didn’t have the capacity to enact bloody retribution.

Fool.

Agony shot through Hiccup and bloody red light flashed before his eyes. He wanted to scream in pain, but he found that he couldn’t move his body. His whole body burned like he’d been plunged into the fires of Muspelheim.

You are mine now, Night Fury…

The pain increased, and Hiccup could feel his consciousness being slowly crushed out of existence. No… he thought weakly. Suddenly, The unnatural heat scorching his body seemed to fade, being replaced by a very real warmth growing deep in his chest. He drew on the sensation for strength, pushing back against the suffocating heat. The warmth inside him responded, growing and growing until he felt like he couldn’t possibly contain it any longer.

I AM NOT YOURS! He roared mentally.

His jaws opened but no sound came out. Instead, his teeth instinctually retracted and he felt
something in his throat shift. There was a flash of purple light, and an explosion. Something hit the ground with a heavy thud.

Hiccup blinked, swaying slightly as his surroundings gradually came back into focus. He took in several gulps of the cool night air, then immediately regretted doing so. The acrid scent of burnt flesh and the metallic odour of blood swamped his senses and he nearly gagged.

It took him a moment to realise that the Nadder was no longer stood in front of him, and was instead lying on her back several feet away, a wisp of smoke rising from a blackened hole in her chest.

“Oh gods,” he murmured, stumbling over to her, “I did this... I’m so sorry...”

“No,” the Nadder wheezed - the unsettling otherness of it’s voice gone. “The Queen ... she uses dark magic to control dragons... she makes us raid to feed her...” she drew in a final rattling breath, forcing air into ruined lungs. “Thank you... for setting me free.”

With that, the Nadder laid her head down, set her face in a dignified posture and made the greatest journey of all.

Astrid threw another load of water onto the smoking ruins in front of her, then set the bucket down and rested her hands on her knees, drawing in several large draughts of air. She straightened - wincing as she stretched her strained back muscles - and looked over the rest of the fire crew. All of them were caked in a mixture of mud and soot and utterly exhausted. The Twins didn’t even have enough energy left to bicker, instead they just stood side-by-side staring at the wreckage with glazed expressions.

The raid had gone badly, even from the sidelines they could all tell that; they’d had to put out over twice as many fires as usual. There had been so many that by the time they’d extinguished one, the next had already begun to spread to the adjoining buildings.

Far worse than the destruction, however, was the silence. Astrid remembered the aftermaths of previous raids, there had been quiet and mourning, yes, but there had also been celebration of another victory, and battle-brothers congratulating each other on a good fight. The few people Astrid could see in the cold grey light of dawn shuffled quietly down the village pathways, talking to each other in hushed voices.

She took a deep breath and pushed away her pain and exhaustion, she had a job to do. “Come on guys,” she said, “This one’s done, let’s make another round of the east side, the fighting was fiercest over there.”

Snotlout didn’t even object to her issuing orders, he just grumbled wordlessly and picked up his bucket.

“Hey Astrid!”

She turned around to see Gobber hobbling up the street towards her.

“How is it?” she asked as he approached.

“Better than we’d expected” he replied, but she could see the truth in his eyes; things were bad.

“What can we do for you, sir?”
The smith’s gaze traveled over each member of the group before returning to Astrid. “Go home, get cleaned up, find something to eat, then get some rest; you’ve done enough.”

“But-”

“You’ll need it; you’re facing the Deadly Nadder this afternoon.”

“Dragon Training!?” Ruffnut burst out, “Are you insane!? We’re dead on our feet here, you’ll get us all killed!”

Gobber’s gaze hardened. “I’m serious,” he said to the blonde twin, “We lost too many warriors tonight, and we were already underhanded. If the beasts attack again, we’ll need you five to replace the fighters we’ve lost.”

Astrid swallowed drily. “Of course, sir,” she replied.

Astrid nodded at Gobber and then Ruffnut before shuffling slowly towards her house. She muttered a prayer of thanks to the gods when her home came into view, whole and undamaged.

Wearily, she pushed open the door and all but fell into her mother’s arms. She allowed herself to be led to a chair, and sat still as her mother wiped the dirt from her face. She graciously accepted the bowl of fish stew pressed into her hands and ate it mechanically.

As soon as she finished her meal she climbed up the stairs to her room. The warm food in her belly had helped revive her, but she still felt like sleeping for a week. She looked longingly at her bed, but turned away, instead heading to her window. Hiccup, she thought. His cove was nicely hidden from the ground, but from the air, to a dragon’s eyes... She shook her head and clambered out of the window. She lowered herself until she was hanging from the sill by her fingertips then dropped to the ground.

She rose quickly from her crouch and glanced around; nobody seemed to have noticed her acrobatics. Good, she thought, and darted out of the village into the forest.

She let her mind wander as she trekked through the woods. She quickly realised that she had a problem; her current unspoken arrangement with Hiccup wouldn’t work. He’d eaten a week’s worth of fish the previous morning, while she hoped that would last him a couple days at least, she couldn’t keep stealing fish to feed him. For one, people would start becoming suspicious if too many baskets went missing, and secondly, she had her own reservations about stealing more much-needed food from her village.

A breeze rustled the canopy above her, bringing with it a whiff of smoke. She ignored it at first, then with a heart-stopping chill she realised she was upwind of Berk. Cursing, she broke into a run, covering the remaining distance in a few unbearably long minutes.

Astrid skidded to a halt at the mouth of the fissure that led into the cove. She took several deep breaths, forcing herself to calm down. She unstrapped her axe from her back and silently slipped between the towering walls of stone.

Her eyes were immediately drawn to the body of the Nadder lying on its back in the centre of the cove. She raised her axe cautiously as she approached. The scents of fire and blood were thick in the air around it. She circled around to get a better view and gasped in shock. The lower half of the Nadder’s chest had been torn open, its entrails gleaming bloodily in the morning sunlight. She could see jagged white spears of bone poking through the blackened flesh around the edge of the wound.
Astrid looked away, she’d seen battle wounds before, but she still balked at the sight of the visceral destruction before her. Nothing on Midgard could cause wounds like that. Except… A memory of a rising whistle, followed by a purple flash and a glimpse of a similarly mutilated body replayed in her mind.

“Howcupp?” She called, apprehension tightening her grip on her axe, “Where are you?”

She glanced around at the cliff walls, thankful to take her eyes of the corpse of the Nadder. At first there was no response, then she heard a low whine from behind her. She whirled around and studied the void beneath the buttress-roots of a tree growing out the side of the cliff; were the shadows a little too dark and solid?

A green eye blinked open in the darkness, it stared at her for a long moment before Hiccup crawled out from the hollow beneath the pine.

“Thank Odin,” she whispered, taking a step towards him.

The dragon shied away with a distressed moan.

“Are you okay Hiccup?” she asked, concerned. “What’s wrong?”

She tried another step forwards. The human-turned-dragon jerked backwards.

‘DON'T COME NEAR ME’ he wrote.

“Why not? What happened here?”

Hiccup let up another moan, his eyes darting to something behind her.

“I don’t speak dragon, Hiccup” she added gently.

‘I KILLED HER. I DIDN’T MEAN TO, IT JUST HAPPENED.’

Her? Astrid thought. Then she turned, following Hiccup’s gaze, and saw the body of the Nadder.

“You mean the Dragon?” she asked.

Hiccup nodded, then slumped to the ground with a soft whine, and realisation slowly dawned on Astrid. She’d heard from some of the veterans that the first kill was the hardest, and that sometimes the memory of it haunted young warriors for many years. Admittedly, they were talking about killing other humans at the time, but this was Hiccup, and she knew he’d felt some sympathy for the Night Fury he’d captured.

“Hiccup,” she said firmly, “Don’t feel guilty about this. You’re a Viking; you kill dragons, it’s in your blood.”

‘AM I? LOOK AT ME.’

“You might not look like one on the outside,” she began, “But you’re still you on the inside, which means that you’re still a viking. Remember that; you need to stay strong until we find a way to turn you back.”

‘SHE SAID THAT ONLY THE NIGHT FURY CAN CHANGE ME BACK, AND SHE USED UP ALL HER POWER DOING THIS.’

“Wait, you spoke to it?”
This prompted Hiccup to launch into a laborious recount of his conversation with the dragon. Astrid noticed that he was getting quicker at scratching the runes into the dirt, but it still took several minutes for him to write it all out.

‘... AND WITH HER LAST BREATH THE NADDER TOLD ME THE DRAGONS ARE CONTROLLED BY “THE QUEEN” AND THAT SHE IS THE REASON THEY RAID BERK’.

Astrid took a step back and read over Hiccup’s text again. “Well, it fits the facts,” she said. “It might even explain a few things. But if this ‘Queen’ really exists, she probably never leaves the nest - The thing we’ve been after since Vikings first sailed here.”

‘DON’T YOU SEE WHAT THIS MEANS?’ he wrote, ‘THE DRAGONS ARE INNOCENT, THEY’RE FORCED TO ATTACK US’

Astrid fingered the haft of her axe uneasily, if this was true, it could undermine everything they thought knew about the dragons. If they were wrong about the beasts’ nature, what other secrets might they be hiding?

_It doesn’t matter_, part of her whispered, _as long as they raid Berk, they’re still your enemy._

A soft whimper pulled Astrid from her thoughts. ‘SHE DIDN’T WANT TO HURT ME, AND I MURDERED HER’ he added with a shaking paw.

Astrid crouched down to his eye-level. “Hiccup,” she began in a gentler, but still firm tone. “The Nadder hurt you and you defended yourself; you didn’t do anything wrong.”

‘I KNOW, BUT I DIDN’T MEAN TO KILL HER’

Astrid had an inkling of what was going through Hiccup’s head. “Do you know how I killed my first dragon?” she asked.

Hiccup shook his head slowly.

“It was a few years ago,” she explained, “I was on fire duty, when a Terror jumped at me from a burning house. I didn’t have time to think, I just reacted. I drew my axe and cut the thing in half. To be honest, it slightly scared me, but I got over it, and learned to trust my instincts, and they’ve saved my life several times since.”

Hiccup let out a long breath. Astrid felt it on her face; warm and smelling strongly of fish.

‘THANK YOU, ASTRID’ he wrote. ‘I KNOW WHAT YOU’RE RISKING TO HELP ME; I OWE YOU’

“Don’t worry about it,” she replied, “Like I said, this is for the good of the village. You can pay me back by staying alive until we find a way to turn you human again.”

She stood up and glanced over at his writing from earlier. “I can’t believe I’m saying this,” she added “But that dragon was onto something.”

Hiccup tilted his head at her, as if to say what!?

“You need to learn to fly.”
Icelandic:
Litla Drekann - Little Dragon
Chapter 5: Stormfly

Astrid stifled a yawn as she stepped under the portcullis into the dragon ring. She’d managed to get a few precious hours of sleep after checking in on Hiccup, but she was still tired, and mentally processing Hiccup’s revelations about the dragon war. She unslung her axe and swung it around a couple times, feeling its comfortable weight in her grip.

The arena in front of her was filled with a labyrinth of tall wooden walls, easily two or three times her height. Narrow corridors stretched away to the left and right of the entrance. She idly wondered when Gobber had found time to set up the maze while overseeing the repairs of the village.

She pushed the thought away, silently repeating her uncle’s training mantra: *In battle you must be as the eye of the storm; violent on the outside, but calm within.*

The portcullis slammed shut behind her, sealing her in along with the other dragon trainees.

“Get ready,” Gobber instructed, pacing away from them, around the circumference of the ring.

Astrid adjusted her grip on her axe and dropped into a ready stance. Around her she sensed the others following her lead

“Guys, wait,” she hissed, remembering Gobber’s advice from the previous night. “We need a plan; if we all charge into that maze blindly we’ll get picked off one by one.”

The clang of a cage opening echoed across the ring, followed by a furious hiss and a raptor-like screech.

“I have a plan: Get that dragon!” Snotlout yelled, raising his mace over his head and charging off down the right-hand path. A moment later, the Twins let out their own battle cries and disappeared down the left path. Fishlegs glanced at her, meeting her gaze with apologetic eyes before shrugging and chasing after Snotlout.

“Well, I tried,” she muttered to herself, before following after the Twins.

“Today is all about **ATTACK!**” Gobber shouted from the sidelines. “Nadders are quick, and light on their feet! Your job is to be quicker and lighter!”

She heard a rushing of air and a creak of wood. She instinctively dived down a side corridor as a shadow flitted across the narrow slit of sky above her. She glanced back as she sprinted away, but the high walls obscured her view. She heard the dragon let out an excited squawk and a moment later Fishlegs cried out in terror. “How in the Hel is this teaching us anything!” he yelled.

Astrid stopped running and glanced around warily. From the far side of the maze she could hear the Twins arguing while Gobber lectured them about finding a dragon’s blind spot. *Quick and light?* she thought, glancing down at her shield. Nadder fire was among the most destructive kinds, but it was also short-ranged; the heavy wooden disk on her arm would just slow her down.
quickly slipped her arm out of the shield let it drop to the arena floor. Her lips twitched in a cold smile. She preferred to wield her axe two-handed anyway.

She cautiously rounded a corner, and spotted Snotlout crouching at the intersection of two pathways. Keeping low, she silently slinked up beside him and peeked around the corner. The Nadder was prowling down the narrow aisle towards them, its wings half-extended to block the passage. She swiftly pulled back, pressing against the wooden wall.

*On three*, she mouthed to Snotlout, readying her axe.

“Stay back babe, I’ll handle this,” he said, stepping out into the intersection. He raised his arm and threw his mace.

Snotlout stared dumbly at the surprised dragon as his weapon clattered harmlessly against the maze wall.

Astrid leapt into action, grabbing the back of his collar and tugging him with her. She felt a flash of heat on her back as the Nadder incinerated the space he’d been occupying a half-second earlier. “*Never throw away your weapon in battle!*” She growled.

Heavy footsteps sounded behind her and she let go of Snotlout, doubling her speed. She darted around a corner. The heavier dragon skidded after her, smashing into the maze wall and knocking it down. The impact didn’t phase her pursuer at all. The Nadder shook off the splintered wood and leapt after her, hopping along the tops of the walls. The huge wooden sections crashed down in its wake.

Astrid glanced around. Snotlout had vanished down a side passageway, leaving her alone in the dragon’s sights. A deafening impact shook the ground, making her stumble. She caught herself, and looked up. Almost in slow motion she saw the wall on her left begin to lean over towards her. She put on a desperate burst of speed and dove into a roll.

For a single instant she was buffeted by a blast of wind and engulfed in a cloud of dust as the maze section fell, missing her by mere inches. In the next, she was finishing her roll and rising, taking in her surroundings. She was in a small clear space, on one side, the open doors of the Nadder’s pen; on the other three, collapsed maze sections.

She heard an angry hiss and a crunching of claws on wood. She reacted; spinning, switching her axe to the left hand. Her right hand found the knife on her belt in the same moment that she turned to see the Nadder leap at her. She raised the knife, then in the blink of an eye, whipped her hand downwards.

The knife struck the near the base of the right wing, slicing nearly the whole length of the membrane. Thick, hot blood splashed on stone. The Nadder bellowed in pain. It’s right side dipped and it crashed heavily to the arena floor. The dragon was slow to rise; stunned.

Astrid saw her opportunity. The Nadder was three paces away. She raised her axe and charged.

Her mental calm shattered. Memories and thoughts slipped in with each step.

One. *A Terrible Terror leaping from a burning house, it’s eyes wide with panic. Her axe rising of its own accord to meet it, splitting its skull in twain. Hot blood soaking her hair.*

Two. *Reading the dragon manual as a child, the same words on every page: “Extremely dangerous, kill on sight.”*
A Night Fury slumped on the ground whimpering with grief. ‘SHE DIDN’T WANT TO HURT ME’

Astrid skidded to a halt, her axe frozen mid-swing. Was this a mindless beast? Or a slave? A monster? Or a victim? She couldn’t tell anymore.

She looked down. She was standing over the Nadder; yellow eyes stared up at her in fear and growing confusion. The eyes blinked. Once. Twice. The Nadder grunted, and shakily clambered to her feet. Astrid stumbled backwards as the dragon shuffled silently into her cell.

A soft pattering of liquid caught Astrid’s attention as the dragon passed. The rent in her wing membrane was bleeding profusely, spreading drops of blood in a trail behind her. She felt sick.

The doors of the Nadder’s prison slammed shut with a resounding boom.

Tuffnut broke the silence that followed. “Who are you and what have you done with Astrid?” he taunted. “I’ve never seen you chicken out on a dragon like that before.”

She didn’t respond. Hiccup’s last words as a human echoed in her mind.

*I did this.*

The harsh glare of the midday sun dragged Hiccup into wakefulness. He raised his head and looked around, blinking rapidly to clear the sleepy fog from his mind. He hadn’t realised that he’d fallen asleep. He’d lain down to rest for a moment after a long, stressful night and the rising sun had seemed to have an almost soporific effect on him. Before he knew what was happening, he’d felt his eyelids begin to droop and his head drop onto his paws.

He glanced over at his shelter beneath the roots of the pine. Part of him wanted to curl up in the shadows under the great tree and go back to sleep. Instead, he forced himself to walk over to the shores of the lake and took a long drink of the cool meltwater within. Refreshed, he sat back on his haunches and met the gaze of the reflected Night Fury.

His conversation with the Nadder - or should he say the Dragon Queen? - from the night before replayed in his head. Whatever magicks the Night Fury possessed had been consumed in transforming him, she’d said, leaving him trapped in this body.

*Well it could be worse,* he thought morosely, *I could have been turned into a Gronckle or a Zippleback.* Based on what he remembered of the Night Fury and what he saw in his own reflection, he thought the Furies were one of the least hideous dragon species: Sleek, streamlined, and possessing an almost feline quality to their appearance. In a different set of circumstances, he might even have described the Furies’ large green eyes and wide black pupils as cute.

The Queen had also said that it was the nature of dragons to attack and steal from the weak, and that eventually his ‘true nature’ would assert itself. Was he fated to become a selfish beast, and turn on his tribe?

*No,* he told himself adamantly. *I might be black and scaly on the outside, but I’m still me on the inside. I haven’t changed.* Was that true though? An explanation for his strange sleeping patterns since his transformation suddenly lit up in his mind. Night Furies had black scales and large, sensitive eyes. Dragon raids happened exclusively at night. Logically, it would make sense if Night Furies were nocturnal - was that what was happening to him?

Considering his ‘attack’ on Astrid, and the incident with the fish basket the day before, it was
obvious that the transformation had affected his subconscious as well as his physical form. How long would it be before it began to affect his conscious thoughts too? Would he even realise when it was happening?

“No,” he growled, turning sharply away from the lake. “I’m still me, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third.” He couldn’t allow himself to start doubting his own thoughts; down that route lay madness and despair.

He cast his gaze around the cove; he needed a project to occupy his thoughts - gods, he missed the forge. His eyes settled on the boulder he’d used in his failed attempts to climb out of the cove. Astrid had been right; stuck in this cove and unable to fly, he was vulnerable to any roving dragon or Viking that chanced upon him. As Gobber was fond of saying: A downed dragon is a dead dragon.

He scrambled atop the rock and turned to face the far wall of his prison. He extended his wings and gave them a few experimental flaps. With a deep breath, and a silent prayer to the gods, he threw himself forwards into empty space.

At the apex of his leap, Hiccup drove his wings downwards. Rather than rising gracefully into the air as he envisioned, he spun uncontrollably and tumbled to the ground. He landed in an ungainly tangle of wings and tail, throwing up a cloud of dust.

Hiccup groaned and clambered to his feet. “Time for some good old-fashioned Viking stubbornness,” he thought out loud, turning back towards the boulder. “If at first you don’t succeed, keep beating your head against the rock until one or the other breaks.”

After the third heavy landing - and accompanying mouthful of soil - Hiccup came to two conclusions. One: He’d had enough of intentionally throwing himself off high places to last a lifetime. And two: the only thing in the nine realms more stubborn than a teenage Viking was the force of gravity.

Perhaps learning to fly solely by trial and error was a bit optimistic, he thought sheepishly. While he was still grounded for now, there must something he could do to make himself less of an easy target. He briefly glanced over at the body of the Nadder - still lying sprawled in the middle of the cove.

While it made him sick to think about what he’d done to the dragon, he had to admit that being able to control his fire and use it at will would be useful if he was attacked. But where to begin? Hiccup closed his eyes and tried to remember how it had felt when he’d used his fire. It had started with a heat blossoming in his chest, somewhere between his heart and his stomach. He focused on that area, and he felt it, something clenched tightly at the centre of his torso. He flexed his chest muscles, and found a new set that seemed to connect to the thing. He experimentally pulled them, and he felt a brief flare of heat, but it quickly sputtered and died.

Encouraged, he repeated his action, taking in a deep breath at the same time. The flame in his chest sprang into life. Hiccup jerked in shock. His teeth instinctually retracted and he shot a small fireball into ground, kicking up a shower of dirt.

Hiccup blinked in surprise. The fire tasted weird; it left an almost metallic taste in his mouth, like the air just after a lightning strike.

Hiccup raised his head to look up at the cliffs and drew in another breath, opening his fire. This time, he held it in, stoking the flames. When he felt he contain it no longer, he fired. A purple bolt
shot from his mouth and streaked across the cove, detonating against the wall with a crack of thunder. The blast set off a small rockslide and left behind a stark black scorch mark on the rock.

A soft fluttering caught Hiccup’s attention. Undeterred by his pyrotechnics, a crow had flapped down onto the Nadder’s chest to feast on her entrails. Oh no you don’t, Hiccup thought. He quickly breathed in and fired another shot. His blast went wide, but it still had the desired effect - the bird squawked in surprise and quickly retreated into the safety of the trees.

Steeling himself, Hiccup approached the Nadder’s corpse. He’d been avoiding it, but he knew that if he was going to carry on living in the cove he had to do something with the body. He idly clawed at the ground with a forepaw, excavating a narrow trench. Burying the Nadder was out of the question; it would take him a week to dig even a shallow grave. When a dragon was killed in a raid on Berk, they usually burnt the body on a bonfire at the edge of the village. However, those fires also created towering pillars of black smoke; if he lit such a fire in the cove it would undoubtedly draw the villagers’ attention.

Hiccup looked up at the cliff walls pensively. His gaze settled on the scorch marks his fire had left on the rocks, and an idea began to form in his head. He knew that in certain conditions fires could burn with minimal smoke. If his fire was as hot as he expected, he might be in luck.

Turning away from the Nadder, he located a small boulder lying at the base of the cliffs. Standing over it, he took in a deep breath, held it for a moment, then retracted his teeth and exhaled, opening the source of his fire. A jet of blue flame shot from his maw, splashing over the rock and instantly crisping the grass around it. He maintained the jet for a couple of seconds, then cut it off, closing his jaws as the last tongues of flame tickled at his throat. The rock was left glowing a dull red, and Hiccup could feel the heat radiating from it even at a distance.

This should work, he thought, returning to the Nadder’s remains. He took a deep breath and looked down at the dragon’s head. He hesitated. She was an intelligent creature; it felt wrong to put her to the flames without at least an acknowledgement of her passing.

Hiccup paused, thinking. Growing up in a village under near constant attack by dragons, he’d seen his fair share of funerals. Most of the traditions centered on ensuring that the dead person wouldn’t come back to life as a Draugr. He doubted that they would mean much to the Nadder.

Eventually he settled on a section of a poem he had heard recited in the mead hall on a Winter’s night. It spoke of flames, a king that tortured his subjects, and a young man who went to the aid of an innocent prisoner.

“Heitr ertu, hripuðr, ok heldr til mikill; göngumk firr, funi!
loði sviðnar, þótt ek á loft berak; brennumk feldr fyr.

“Átta nætr sat ek milli elda hér, svá at mér manngi mat né baðd
nema einn Agnarr, er einn skal ráða, Geirröðar sonr, Gotna landi.

“Heill skaltu, Agnarr, alls þík heilan biðr
Veratýr vera;
eins drykkjar þú skalt aldrigi
betri gjöld geta.”
As the final words faded into the background noise Hiccup inhaled deeply, filling his lungs with air. He held it for a long moment, then breathed fire upon the Nadder’s head.

Two great intakes of air, and two fiery exhalations later, all that remained of the Nadder was a patch of blackened ground and a pile of dark grey ash.

Bowing his head, Hiccup stepped back and spread his wings. *I don’t know where dragons go when they die, he thought, but I hope it’s better than the life you had here*. He flapped powerfully, creating a gust that scattered the Nadder’s remains. He watched as the wind took the tiny grey particles, carrying them far, far away from Berk.

If only he could escape his own problems so easily.

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Astrid lay on her bed, staring up at the ceiling. However, she didn’t see the rough wooden boards above her. Instead, all she saw was the bloody gash her knife had left in the Nadder’s wing, and the steaming red trail she had left behind as she slunk back into her cage. The dragon’s pained cry as the blade cut into her flesh echoed in Astrid’s ears over and over again.

She raised her hands above her face. In the dim light, she could see that they were shaking. *What’s wrong with me?* She’d witnessed the destruction the dragons wrought on her home first hand: she’d seen whole families burnt alive and her beloved uncle’s life destroyed by the beasts. She’d dedicated her life to winning dragon training and restoring her family honour. She should hate them.

Yet, she couldn’t get the look in the Nadder’s eyes as she stood over it, axe in hand, out of her head. It hadn’t been the gaze of a savage killer, they had been the terrified eyes of a wounded and cornered animal - an animal she’d wounded.

Her fingers twitched. She wasn’t good at sitting on a problem; she needed to *do* something. Her hands ached for the haft of her axe; training - no matter the time of night - was always good to work off excess emotion. However, part of her felt sick at the idea of even picking up a weapon again after what she did.

She dropped her hands to the bed with a strained exhale. Who was she to question seven generations of Viking wisdom? Her people killed dragons; it was the way of the world, it was *right*.

*Only the second Viking ever to see a Night Fury and live to tell the tale, a small voice inside her whispered. And possibly the only one who knows the truth of why the dragons raid us.*

She sighed. What did they know - really *know* - about dragons anyway? She wracked her brain, trying to recall everything about Nadders that she could. *They breathe superheated fire and shoot poisoned spines from the tail*, she thought, *avoid those*. *Sharp claws, and strong legs, aim for—*

“... the wings.” she finished aloud. She wasn’t sure why - she vaguely recalled Fishlegs explaining something about ‘thermal regulation’ - but Dragons seemed to have an inordinate amount of blood flowing through their wings, even a small cut to the membrane would bleed profusely. It was part of what made capturing dragons so difficult, they would often bleed out from wing injuries long before the battle was over.

She thought of the Nadder, huddled in a cold stone cell, slowly bleeding out through the wound she’d inflicted. Her stomach twisted, and she was glad that she’d left her appetite behind somewhere in the training ring that afternoon.
Determination crystallized in her chest. It was time to do something decisive. She smoothly rolled out of bed and slipped downstairs - leaving her weapons and armour behind. Quietly, she rifled through the cupboards, pilfering the items she needed, then stepped out into the night.

Although the stars were obscured by clouds, and a light drizzle fell from the heavens, Astrid hunched her shoulders and pressed on. The moon shone faintly through the clouds, spreading a weak, diffuse light over the village, but she didn’t need it; she knew the way.

First, she made her way down to the docks and took another basket of fish from the warehouse. She felt a pang of guilt as she stole more vital food so soon after her last theft, but she knew that there was no other way. As she slipped out the warehouse doors she made a silent promise to find a way to pay back the village for the food she’d taken.

Shouldering the basket, she made her way up the ramps, skirted the boundaries of the village, and started down the track towards the kill ring. She walked briskly, trying to use the rhythms of her body to distract her from the nigging feeling of guilt in her chest. Before, she’d been able to rationalise her actions helping Hiccup as for the good of the village. Now, though: why was she doing this? On a hunch? On the second-hand words of a dragon? To satisfy her conscience?

Before she could answer her questions, she crested the final rise and laid eyes on the training ring. Thunder rumbled in the distance, out to sea. The rain was noticeably heavier now than it had been when she left the village. She quickened her pace, hurrying down the incline and over the rope bridge that lead to the ring proper. She had limited time: she did not want to be stuck outside the village when that storm hit.

She grabbed a lantern from the storage shed on the outside of the ring, lighting it using a flint from a pouch on her belt, then returned to the entrance of the arena. She cranked open the gate. Taking a deep breath, she raised the lantern above her head and stepped inside.

The wreckage from the training session had been cleared away, leaving the arena silent and empty. She felt naked standing in the ring without the comforting weight of her shoulder pads or a weapon in her hands. Almost reluctantly, she released the catch and allowed the gate to slam shut behind her.

Her heart pounding in her ears, she approached the Nadder’s cage. She set the fish basket and her supplies down a short distance away and stepped up to the lever that released the great doors. She rested her hand on the smooth, worn wood. This is it. She whispered a quick prayer to Thor, and pushed down.

The large iron-reinforced doors clanged open. Astrid held her breath, expecting fiery death to leap from the shadows. Nothing moved. She counted three rapid heartbeats, then picked up her lantern and approached the cage’s black maw.

An angry hiss sounded from the darkness. She flinched and instinctively stepped backwards. When nothing moved from the shadows, she took a deep breath, and moved forwards again. “It’s okay,” she said, her voice sounding pathetically small. “I- I don’t want to hurt you.” She raised her light and squinted into the darkness.

The Nadder was huddled in the far corner of the cage, her injured wing tucked close to her body. She appeared to be shivering slightly. A trail of dried blood ran from around her feet to the drain in the center of the cell. She stared at Astrid with wary golden eyes.

Astrid cautiously took another step forwards. The Nadder rose to her full height, hissing louder. A dry rattle echoed off the stones as the spines on her tail rose. Her deep black pupils narrowed to
threatening slits.

“Okay...” Astrid said, stepping backwards. Not taking her eyes of the dragon, she crouched and placed her lantern on the ground, then retreated out of the cage.

The Nadder obviously didn’t trust her, but given the circumstances, that was to be expected. Well she hasn’t killed me yet, she thought, that has to be a good sign. She cracked open the lid of the basket she’d brought and pulled out a large cod.

The Nadder shifted nervously and let out a short hiss as she approached. Astrid stopped beside her lantern. “I get it,” she said, “You don’t trust me. I won’t come any closer than this, alright?”

The dragon’s only response was a nervous shuffling of her wings. Astrid swore she heard a muffled noise of pain as she pulled on her injury.

“Now,” Astrid continued, “With all that’s happened recently, I imagine that you haven’t been fed in a while. You must be hungry.” She held out the fish. The Nadder’s nostrils widened as she took in air. Her eyes darted to the fish then back to Astrid’s face. She let out an uncertain warble.

With a short underarm motion, Astrid tossed the cod so that it landed just in front of the dragon. The Nadder sniffed at the fish, before snapping it up and swallowing it in a single gulp. Astrid tried not cringe as razor-sharp teeth flashed in the lantern light.

A questioning chirp came from the Nadder as she turned her gaze back to Astrid. Astrid backpedaled, picked up the fish basket, and set it down beside the lantern. She reached inside, pulled out the next fish, and tossed it to the Nadder; it was devoured it as quickly as the first.

Astrid repeated this for the next few fish, making sure to handle each one as much as possible before throwing it, hoping that the Nadder would associate her scent with the food.

On the fourth throw, Astrid adjusted the length of her toss, landing the fish just out of reach of the dragon's neck. With barely a moment’s hesitation, she stepped forwards and snapped it up. Astrid repeated this process, gradually drawing the dragon closer and closer to her.

When she was two arm-lengths away, the Nadder stopped and let out a short growl. Astrid froze, her hand half in the fish basket. The Nadder chuffed and nodded at the basket. Astrid almost laughed; she’d forgotten that the dragon was supposedly as intelligent as her. “Sorry,” she muttered, and kicked over the basket like she had done for Hiccup, spilling the remaining contents onto the floor. The Nadder immediately dove into the pile, all but inhaling the fish.

Astrid took advantage of the dragon’s temporary distraction and stepped around her side to get a better look at the injury. Her first thought was that the wound looked remarkably clean given the squalid conditions of the cage. She could tell that the cell had been perfunctorily washed down somewhat recently, however an almost black mixture of dried blood, excrement, and gods know what else encrusted the corners and cracks in the floor.

Most of the wound had scabbed over, but Astrid could see that in places the scabs were cracked, and a thin trickle of blood ran down the dragon’s wing. She shifted slightly to get a better view, and the Nadder suddenly jerked her head up and rounded on Astrid. She bared her teeth, letting out a long, low hiss.

“It’s okay!” Astrid exclaimed, “I want to help you!” She automatically extended her hand in a placating gesture, unknowingly moving her arm into striking range. The Nadder reared back with a startled screech, cocking her head to stare down at Astrid with a single yellow eye.
Part of Gobber’s lecture from that afternoon drifted through Astrid’s mind; a Nadder’s blind spot was directly in front of its nose. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you,” she said, sidestepping. “I’ll stay where you can see me from now on, okay?”

The Nadder snorted and curled her tail around so that the bristling spines formed a barrier between Astrid and her body.

Astrid took a deep breath, belatedly realising that she’d managed to position the dragon between herself and the door of the cage. She glanced up at the Nadder. A single golden eye blinked down at her impassively.

“I want to help you,” she repeated breathlessly, gesturing to the Nadder’s wing. “If you let me touch you, I can help make that better. If you don’t, you might die. Do you understand anything that I’m saying?” The Nadder blinked. “Look,” she continued, “I know that I hurt you, but you attacked me first, I didn’t have any...” she trailed off. “I’m sorry, okay?”

The Nadder made a soft noise, lowering her head down to Astrid’s eye level. Her tail drifted away from her body slightly. Astrid’s breath caught in her throat - was it her imagination or were those tail spines relaxed slightly?

The Nadder blinked and bobbed her head slightly. Astrid realised that she had to make the first move.

The tail was just within arm’s reach. Hesitantly, she reached out a shaking hand. The Nadder made no move to pull away. Not daring to breathe, Astrid rested a trembling hand on the side of one of the spikes. The spine was smooth beneath the pads of her fingers. Heart in her throat, she ran her hand upwards, gently pushing on the spine. To her disbelief, the spine gave to her gentle pressure, folding down to lie flat against the tail.

She reached out to another spine and repeated her actions. Gradually, she began to smooth down the spines on the Nadder’s tail. As she worked, she became aware of a low thrumming sound coming from the dragon - was it purring?

Astrid patted down the last spines at the tip of tail, and disbelievingly pulled her hand away. She stared at the Nadder incredulously. “Hiccup was right,” she breathed. “Everything we know about you guys... is wrong.”

Suddenly, the Nadder whipped her tail away and butted her head into Astrid’s chest. Astrid stumbled backwards in shock. The Nadder followed. Panicked, Astrid backed up, glancing from side to side. The cell was too narrow for her to slip past the Nadder. Her back collided with the stone wall.

The Nadder reared up, her silhouette blocking out all the light from the doorway. Astrid heard the great maw open. She clenched her eyes shut, praying that her death would be quick. A strange, choking sound met her ears, followed by the wet splat of something hitting the floor. Confusion made her open her eyes. The Nadder was crouched before her, the dragon’s gaze fixed on a point on the ground just in front of Astrid. She let her eyes drift lower; lying at her feet was the rear half of a fish.

The Nadder grunted, her eyes shifting between the fish and Astrid.

It took her a second to realise what the Dragon wanted. “You have got to be-”

The Nadder growled and repeated the gesture.
No going back. Astrid slowly bent and picked up the fish. Steeling herself, she raised it to her lips and took a bite. It was oilily, raw and disgusting. Grimacing, she forced herself to swallow.

She shuddered. Still tastes better than seabiscuit, she thought.

The Nadder stepped forwards and nuzzled at the back of her hands - which were still numbly holding onto the fish. A low purr rumbled in the dragon’s throat.

“You want this back?” Astrid asked, dumbstruck at the sight of a dragon begging for food like a housecat.

The Nadder chirped and opened her jaws, revealing rows of needle-sharp teeth. Astrid hesitantly dropped the fish into the waiting jaws. The jaws snapped closed, swallowing the fish in a single gulp, then the Nadder immediately went back to nosing at her hands.

Still not quite believing what was happening, Astrid cautiously rotated her left hand and rested her palm on the dragon’s muzzle. The Nadder stilled. The scales were surprisingly warm to the touch. The dragon’s hot breath tickled at the skin of her arms.

An electric thrill ran through Astrid. This was a deadly creature of the sky, that could kill her in an instant, yet she was allowing herself to be touched.

With a soft snort, the Nadder pulled back, ending the contact. She chirped and shuffled to the side of the cage, letting Astrid out of the cell.

Astrid cautiously stepped past the dragon and took a lungful of the fresh air outside of the prison. It was raining fully now, and moisture quickly soaked through her clothes, but she didn’t care. She closed her eyes and raised her face to the heavens, silently thanking every god she could think off that she was still alive - despite her conviction, part of her had believed that she had doomed herself as soon as she opened the Nadder’s cage.

The sound of heavy footsteps followed by an inquisitive chirp brought her back to reality. The Nadder had followed her out of the cage and was standing by her side expectantly. Detachedly, she realised that she’d been thinking of the dragon as a ‘she’ since that afternoon. She wasn’t sure how she knew, but some instinct told her that the bird-like reptile was female.

Astrid took a deep breath, making friends with the Nadder was an earth-shattering revelation, but it wasn’t why she had come here. She picked up the small pack of supplies she’d brought and stepped back into the cage, moving the lantern from the floor to a hook set into the ceiling. The Nadder trailed her curiously.

Astrid set down her bag and reached out towards the Nadder, holding her hand an inch in front of her muzzle. The dragon sniffed at her fingers, then pressed forwards into the contact. She ran her hand across her jaw and then down her scaly neck, pausing when she reached the wing-shoulder. The Nadder squawked a warning, but made no move to pull away.

Astrid met the gaze of a single, golden eye. “This is going to hurt,” she explained, hoping that the dragon understood her, “But it will help you get better, okay?”

The Nadder let out a low croon, and extended her injured wing.

“Thank you,” Astrid whispered. Reaching into the bag, she removed a container of alcohol and used it to wash the wound. A small hiss of pain came from the dragon as the liquid seeped into the cut, but she held remarkably still. That was the easy part.
Now, Astrid took out a large needle and thread that were originally intended for repairing the Sjóknapa’s sails. She was thankful that she’d spent enough time watching her mother tending to her father’s - and later, her own - injuries that she knew how to stitch up a wound.

She washed the needle with the alcohol, then threaded it with shaking hands. Gingerly, she reached out with her left hand and pinched the gash in the Nadder’s wing closed. Then, with her right, she pressed the tip of the needle against the wing. Holding her breath, Astrid swiftly pushed the needle through the membrane. The Nadder grunted in pain beside her, and the wing shifted in her grip fractionally. Then the needle was through, pulling the thread along with it. Astrid let out a sigh of relief, and set to work sewing up the wound. She tried not to cause the dragon any undue pain, but the wing membrane was tougher than she was used to, and she cringed whenever a pained noise escaped the Nadder’s jaws.

It only took her a couple of minutes to close up the hole, but they were the longest minutes of Astrid’s life. By the time she had finished, her hands were shaking so badly, she could barely tie off the loose end of the thread.

Astrid let go of the wing and took a step back, letting the Nadder examine her handiwork. The dragon sniffed at the taut threads experimentally.

“I know it’s uncomfortable,” she told the dragon, “But you only have to put up with it for a week, and your wing will be as good as new.”

The Nadder gingerly folded the injured wing against her body.

The cell was momentarily illuminated by a bright white light, followed a fraction of a second later by a booming, bass rumble. Astrid spun around; the rain outside the cell had become a deluge - she’d been so focused on the Nadder that she’d completely missed the storm breaking.

Astrid cursed under her breath. Unhooking the lantern from the ceiling, she made her way to the arena’s entrance. Holding the light high, she squinted through the bars. She could barely see the rope bridge that lead back to the mainland. Attempting to make it back to the village in these conditions would be almost suicidal; she would be far better off finding shelter here and waiting out the storm.

Her first thought was the cramped storage shed outside the ring. The roof of the rickety old building probably leaked, and the thought of spending the night crammed between dusty weapon racks wasn’t appealing, but it was better than nothing. Then another idea occurred to her. She turned away from the gate and headed back to the still-open cage.

“You think you can share this hole for a night?” Astrid asked the Nadder as she stepped inside.

The dragon chirped back at her.

“I’ll assume that was a ‘yes’,” she said, sitting down in the far corner and placing the lantern on the floor in front of her. She drew up her legs and hugged her arms to her chest. Now that the adrenaline of meeting the Nadder had worn off, she felt cold and wet and weary; her muscles ached from training that afternoon and fire duty the night before.

A blast of warm air ruffled Astrid’s bangs. She looked up to find the Nadder staring down at her. “What do you want?” she snapped.

The dragon snorted and shuffled back slightly, still blinking down at her.

Astrid sighed. “I suppose I should call you something,”
The Nadder cocked her head.

“A name,” Astrid continued, “I can’t just call you ‘Dragon’ or ‘Nadder’, it’s-”

Thunder rumbled again, and the Nadder turned around, staring out at the sky almost longingly. She seemed to make a decision, and stepped out into the storm. She padded out into the center of the arena and spread her wings, then froze, waiting for something.

A few heartbeats passed. The wind gusted through the arena making the dragon’s wing membranes flutter. The Nadder raised her head to the sky and let out a long sorrowful keen that rose and fell with the wind. Astrid stared at her, wondering what she was doing.

The wind gusted again, and the dragon repeated her cry. Terrible realisation slowly dawned on Astrid. *It’s the first time she’s felt wind beneath her wings since...* In that moment she realised the cruelty of what they did to the dragons: It wasn’t just the dank conditions that they kept them in, or that they tortured them in the name of ‘training’; no, the true cruelty was that they took these proud creatures of the wind and sky and chained them to the ground.

The Nadder’s cry sounded a final time. She slowly folded her wings and padded back towards her prison.

“*Stormfljúga,***” Astrid whispered.

The Nadder froze, tilting her head in unspoken question. “Stormfly,” Astrid repeated softly, “It’s your name.”

Stormfly blinked a couple of times, then chirped happily and stepped back into the shelter. She circled a couple times and settled down in the other back corner of the square cell, across from Astrid.

The wind gusted outside again, blowing through the open cage doors and cutting through Astrid’s sodden clothes. She groaned, clambering to her feet and hauling on the heavy metal-reinforced doors. She left about a foot of space between the two doors; not daring to close them all the way. While she was fairly certain that Stormfly wasn’t going to attack her, there was no way to open the cell from inside, and she didn’t want to overstay her welcome.

Her labour over, Astrid returned to her corner of the cell and sat down. She shuffled in vain, trying to find a position against the unyielding stone that didn’t make her ache. Eventually, she gave up and settled in for a long, uncomfortable night.

Astrid divided her time between staring numbly out at the rain, and studying Stormfly as she rested. After their first few tense interactions, the dragon hadn’t acted at all threatening towards her. Even before then, she’d been defensive, not aggressive. The contrast between the creature resting peacefully beside her, and the vicious beasts that attacked Berk was so stark that Astrid would have almost said they were different species.

“What am I going to do?” she whispered. If this was how the dragons acted when left to their own devices, what they did to the training dragons was monstrous; they were as much victims in this war as the Berkians. However, The Queen - if she really existed - remained hidden in the unreachable nest, while the raiding dragons threatened her home’s very existence.

What should she do? Did she follow her convictions and turn her back on seven generations of Viking tradition? Or did she disregard her conscience and do what her people expected of her? *Could* she do either of those things?
The night wore on. Thor howled and raged outside, and she found no answers to her internal strife. The cold stone beneath and behind her, along with the persistent draught through the cracked doors, leached the warmth from her body. She soon found herself shivering. She hugged herself tighter and huddled close to the lantern, but the feeble heat given off by the tiny flame did little to ward off the cold.

Sometime later - an interval marked only by intermittent flashes of lightning - the lantern flame sputtered and died. Astrid swore and fumbled for her flint and steel. Her fingers were numb and stiff, and it took her four tries to get even a small shower of sparks. The lantern resolutely remained cold and dark. She tried several more times to no avail. Eventually, the firesteel slipped from her senseless fingers, clattering on the stone floor. Astrid threw the flint down alongside it in a mixture of frustration and anguish, and huddled, shivering, in the darkness.

Distantly, Astrid was aware that she was probably going to die. The weather of the Barbaric Archipelago was almost as dangerous as the dragons; fail to treat it with the proper respect and it would kill you as surely as dragonfire. Strangely, she didn’t feel any fear at the prospect of her demise, just an odd sense of melancholy and disappointment: Without her aid, Hiccup would likely starve, and the war with the dragons would go on unchanged, as it had for generations before.

*Wait, that doesn’t make sense,* she thought. She had in her mind an image of a black dragon, but Hiccup was a boy, Stoick’s son. Yes, the chief’s son was a Night Fury. But...

Her thoughts were going in circles. She would sort out the identity of the chief’s son later. Right now, she needed to rest. She leant her head back against the rock wall. *So tired...*

Something nudged her in the side and she sprawled forwards onto the floor. She opened her eyes - she hadn’t realised she’d closed them - and blinked several times, trying to focus on the large mass standing over her.

Eventually she recognised the silhouette of a dragon, but not the dark dragon she remembered: that one had walked on four legs.

“Storm...” she murmured, voice slurring.

The dragon cooed softly, and descended towards her. Astrid let out a wordless cry and tried to scramble away, but her arms and legs wouldn’t respond. Before she could move, she was wrapped up in a warm, leathery embrace. She stopped struggling as her frigid extremities began to register the heat radiating from her living cocoon.

A gentle croon came from the unseen dragon as her embrace shifted, loosening slightly. Astrid suddenly became aware of a difference in texture of the material encasing her. The new surface was firmer and rougher than the leather, but not quite as warm. She gently rolled over and pressed her back against the rough surface, lying on her side. The material around her shifted slightly one final time, then stilled.

Astrid lay there in complete darkness, listening. She could still just about make out the noises of the wind and rain, but they were muffled somehow; distant. The most prominent sound in her perception was a slow, rhythmic thumping that seemed to emanate from behind her.

Part of her wanted to find out what that strange beat was, but her new cocoon was surprisingly comfortable and warm.

She would find out later; she knew she could rest safely now.
Icelandic:
Stormfljúga - Stormfly (roughly)

The poem that Hiccup recites here is actually an extract from an Old Norse poem called the Grímnismál. The English translation of the extract Hiccup recites here is as follows:

Hot art thou, fire! | too fierce by far;
Get ye now gone, ye flames!
The mantle is burnt, | though I bear it aloft,
And the fire scorches the fur.

'Twixt the fires now | eight nights have I sat,
And no man brought meat to me,
Save Agnar alone, | and alone shall rule
Geirröth's son o'er the Goths.

Hail to thee, Agnar! | for hailed thou art
By the voice of Veratyr;
For a single drink | shalt thou never receive
A greater gift as reward.
Chapter 6: Prisoners

Astrid floated, warm and comfortable. She blearily wondered why she had awakened, when her body clearly wanted to remain asleep. However, a childhood in a fisherman’s family and long years of training had taught her to rise with the sun, despite the desires of her flesh. Letting out a soft groan, she slowly stretched out from her foetal curl.

She froze when her fingers brushed against soft, warm leather rather than her rough woolen blanket. She wrenched open her eyes only to be confronted by more darkness. Ignoring the sudden surge of panic, she forced herself to breath evenly and absorb everything she could about her environment. As she did so, she realised that her surroundings weren’t entirely black; a dim purplish light permeated through the material encasing her.

Astrid slowly reached out and felt the leathery material again, then experimentally pushed on it. It resisted for a moment, then she heard a snort and the curtain lifted, spilling a shaft of sunlight onto her face. Groaning at the sudden change in illumination she threw up her arm and buried her face in the crook of her elbow. After a few seconds of discomfort she was able to remove her arm and squint through the bright light. She was lying on the ground in a stone cell, the dawn sunlight falling on her through a pair of cracked-open metal doors.

It all came back to her in a rush.

*Training, blood on stone, a shaking hand stroking deadly spines, mending a torn wing, sheltering in the cell...*

“You saved my life,” Astrid said, holding out her hand towards Stormfly’s muzzle. The Dragon sniffed at her fingers for a moment, then pressed her muzzle into Astrid’s palm. “Thank you.”

Stormfly hummed softly in response.

Astrid held the contact for a long moment, then slowly pulled away, her fingers lingering on the Nadder’s scales. She pushed open the cage doors and stepped out into the dawn light. The storm had expended its energy while she slept, and above the arena’s chains the morning sun illuminated a shining cathedral of clouds; the last remnants of the violence from the night before.

Astrid sighed as she slowly stretched her limbs, gazing eastwards across the ring. The breaking of a fresh day showed her world in a new light. The war with the dragons, that unshakeable cornerstone of Viking culture, was no longer a righteous crusade against *djöfla* spawned by Loki himself, it was a cruel slaughter of intelligent, compassionate creatures.
She turned and looked back through the doors of the cage. Stormfly sat in the same position she’d been when Astrid awoke, quietly watching her. Astrid looked away; she couldn’t meet those sorrowful but understanding eyes. “I’m sorry,” she whispered, pushing on the heavy iron doors. An edge of determination crept into her voice. “I’ll get you out of here someday, I promise.”

The cage slammed shut. Astrid leaned against the heavy door, resting her forehead on the cool metal. What in Odin’s name am I doing? She asked herself. Was she really promising to betray her people and set a dragon free?

Yes, I am, she told herself firmly. Less than a day ago she had maimed the Nadder, yet when on the verge of freezing to death that night, Stormfly had helped her, rather than leaving her to die as she justly deserved. And how did Astrid repay that forgiveness? By locking the dragon back in her prison. Stormfly deserved better than that.

She looked around at the other four cage doors, seeing in her mind’s eye the dragons incarcerated within. Gods, they all deserve better...

For a moment, Astrid was overcome by the scale and audacity of what she was considering - Could she, a lone Viking girl of unimportant birth - not even a woman yet - overturn seven generations of tradition? She grit her teeth in determination. Focus on what you can achieve, she thought. That means keeping Hiccup and Stormfly safe, and getting caught in the arena in the early hours of the morning won’t help them.

With that, she picked up the now sodden fish basket, slipped out of the ring and set off at a brisk trot towards the slowly waking village.

Her family were already awake when Astrid stepped into her home - having already stashed the empty fish basket at the back of their firewood store.

“Oh there you are, Astrid,” Her mother said, looking up from the pot she tended. “Orvar said you weren’t in your bed this morning, where’d you run off to?” she asked good-naturedly.

“Oh, I- I woke up early, so I went for a walk.” Astrid replied, brushing a stray lock of hair away from her face. She was suddenly aware just how disheveled her appearance was. “It helps to clear my head, you know?”

Gunhilda hummed in acknowledgement, reaching up and unhooking a ladle from the ceiling, then scooping a portion of porridge into a bowl. “As long as you’re okay my dear,” she said, handing the bowl to Astrid. “I heard about you and that Nadder.”

Terror suddenly shot through Astrid. How did she know? Had somebody seen her with Stormfly? “N-Nadder?” she spluttered eventually.

“I spoke to Inga Thorston yesterday,” she explained. “According to her twins you froze up when facing the Nadder in training. Don’t worry about it; practicing the moves in training is one thing, but facing down a bloodthirsty firebreathing monster is another thing altogether.”

Astrid forced herself not to audibly sigh with relief.

“What are you looking at me like that for?” her mother continued, “I haven’t always been this age, you know. Once upon a time, I was a young shieldmaiden too.”

Astrid nodded, although the porridge in her mouth suddenly tasted like ash.
Hiccup stood upon a narrow rock outcropping overlooking a glowing red lake of molten rock. A black shadow rushed over his head, and he turned around to see a Night Fury stall her wings and come to a stop mid-air, before gracefully settling down on to the rock.

“Night Fury,” she said.

“Er... Hello,” Hiccup replied.

“The other dragons tell me you have learned to control your fire,” she began. “I’m impressed; It takes hatchlings weeks to accomplish what you managed in the space of a single day.” She purred, slitted obsidian pupils widening.

Hiccup felt a warm flush run from his nose to his tail-tip. He instinctively wanted to do anything to please this dragon. “Th-thank you,” he stuttered.

The female fury looked down at the ground, her features adopting a sorrowful expression. “I deeply regret what was done to you,” she murmured.

“It’s nothing,” Hiccup said instantly - those beautiful emerald eyes shouldn’t be tainted by sadness.

“Your forgiveness is admirable,” she replied, looking up at him - her eyes seemed to glow in the dim red light. “However, I insist on giving you a gift as compensation.”

“What is it?” Hiccup asked, breathless.

“I offer you the gift of the Night Furies’ dominion,” she whispered, “I offer mastery over the night airs, superiority over every creature that swims, flies or crawls beneath the moon. Find me, and I shall bequeath this to you.”

“How do I-”

Hiccup blinked. The Night Fury was no longer there. In her place stood a forest-green Nadder, blood dripping from a hole blasted in her chest.

“The Queen uses dark magic to control dragons” she wheezed, air rattling in and out of punctured lungs. “She makes us raid to feed her.”

Hiccup backed away in horror. Hic back legs scrabbled on the edge of the outcropping. He spun around. The lake of molten rock had become an ocean of blood; his nostrils were filled with the cloying stench of it. A leviathan stirred the crimson depths.

You are mine, Night Fury.

Hiccup woke with a start. The ground in front of him exploded in a flash of blue light. His eyes closed instinctively as dirt and pebbles rained down on him.

Heart pounding in his ears, Hiccup let out a shaking breath and slowly opened his eyes. He was still in the cove, in his hollow beneath the roots of the pine. It had just been a dream; In his panic he must have instinctively used his fire.

Groaning, Hiccup crawled out of his hiding place and took a breath of the late morning air.

He could still smell blood.

A sudden scrabbling came from the entrance to the cove. Hiccup spun around, retracting his teeth,
preparing to use his fire. He prayed that it wasn’t anybody he knew from the village.

Astrid burst into the cove, a shortbow held tightly in her grip, arrow knocked at the ready. “Hiccup!” She gasped, “I heard a- What happened?”

Hiccup blinked at her; he wasn't used to seeing her wielding a weapon other than her axe - although it didn't surprise him that she knew how to shoot a bow.

'I'M OKAY' he wrote in the dirt, 'I HAD AN ACCIDENT WITH MY FIRE.' He looked her up and down. 'ARE YOU HURT?' He asked, 'I SMELL BLOOD'.

Astrid looked at him in confusion for a moment. "I'm fine," she explained, "I was just hunting in the forest and... One moment."

She disappeared into the crack in the cliffs and a few seconds later emerged carrying a young doe across her shoulders. Hiccup was quietly impressed by the casual display of strength. With a huff she dropped the animal in front of him. "For you," she grunted.

Hiccup nodded in appreciation and stepped forwards, examining the deer. He spotted a small red puncture mark in the creature's neck where Astrid's arrow had struck. Hiccup breathed in the doe's scent, he could smell the animal's musk, heavy with the fear of the hunt, and the salty odour of it's blood, still warm beneath the hide.

He uneasily unsheathed his teeth; could he do it? Before, with the fish basket he'd been starving, and in the grip of instinct. Now though, could he consciously bite into and consume a whole, warm carcass?

"Well, get on with it," Astrid growled.

Experimentally, Hiccup leaned down and bit into the deer's flank. His teeth easily cut through the doe's hide and warm blood filled his mouth; the taste was surprisingly pleasant. Again, his jaw and neck muscles seemed to know what to do; he tore off a strip of flesh, then tossed his head back and swallowed It in a couple of gulps.

An unconscious purr of satisfaction escaped his jaws, and he lowered his head to take another bite. It had been two days since Astrid brought him the basket of fish and his hunger had just been starting to make itself known again.

Hiccup finished the meal by cracking the doe's bones between his jaws and using his rough tongue to scrape out the marrow contained within. Dropping the last bone onto his small pile of leftovers, he turned towards where Astrid sat on a nearby rock, idly cleaning her fingernails with the point of her knife - her bow and quiver resting against the side of the stone. Her eyes widened as he approached, and she automatically switched the knife into position to strike.

Hiccup froze mid-step, realising how he must appear to her, muzzle smeared with blood and viscera. Turning tail, he quickly padded over to the lake and, clenching his teeth, dunked his head under the surface.

"So," Astrid said conversationally, coming up to stand beside him. "You can breathe fire."

Hiccup nodded, grinning. 'WATCH THIS'

Shaking off the water droplets clinging to his scales, he stepped up to the remains of the doe. He breathed in deeply, opened the source of his fire, and exhaled a jet of blue flame. A second later, he closed his jaws, leaving behind nought but a small cloud of ash.
"Huh," Astrid said, sounding somewhat underwhelmed.

Hiccup looked back at her disbelievingly - *he'd just breathed fire, for odin's sake! Couldn't she be at least a little bit impressed?*

"Is that all you can do?" She asked. "The other Night Fury's fire is explosive - more like a Gronckle's shot."

Hiccup narrowed his eyes and focused on a point on the cliff wall behind her, far above her head. He inhaled sharply, held it for a moment, then let loose a streak of blue fire. His shot flashed across the cove and detonated with a resounding *crack!*

Astrid flinched and spun around. For a moment she stared at the crater in the cliff face almost in shock. Then she turned on him, eyes flashing with azure fire. "What were you thinking!?" she hissed. "You could have hit me! Or worse, someone from the village might have heard!"

Hiccup couldn’t resist. ‘I’M A NIGHT FURY,’ he wrote. ‘I NEVER MISS.’ In reality, his shot had hit a bit to the left of where he aimed, but she didn’t need to know that.

Astrid sighed in exasperation.

Hiccup sat back on his haunches, watching her. She glared back at him in silence. He cleared his throat and raised a paw to write a message.

“*I spent the night with the Nadder in the training ring,*” Astrid blurted out.

Hiccup blinked at her in shock. "What!?" he exclaimed, momentarily forgetting she couldn’t understand his dragon-speech.

She let out a long exhale, running her hand through her fringe again. “*In training yesterday, I threw my knife at her and slashed open her wing,*” she began hesitantly.

Hiccup leaned forwards, feeling his ear-flaps rising, he’d never known Astrid to be anything other than the model of absolute confidence; what on Midgard could make her nervous?

“That night,” she continued, “All I could think about was the sound that she made when my blade hit, and what you said about the dragons being controlled. I... I crept into the ring and sewed up her wing.”

‘THE NADDER LET YOU?’

Astrid nodded. “*I brought another basket of fish with me to feed her, she regurgitated one for me - I think it was some kind of ritual - I took a bite out of it and she suddenly trusted me. And then, later on in the storm, she sheltered me under her wing and kept me warm.*”

Hiccup stared at her for a long moment, then glanced at the muddy black stain on the ground where the green Nadder had lain. *So she was telling the truth, he thought., The dragons really are just as much victims in this war as we are.* A shudder went through him as he realised that, he was quite possibly the only free dragon left in the world. His gaze flicked to the cliffs enclosing him; no, his mind might be his own, but he was just as much a prisoner as the rest of them.

Hiccup turned his gaze back to Astrid. ‘*WHAT DO WE DO NOW?’*

“Simple,” she said with steely determination, “We end the war.”
‘AND HOW DO WE MANAGE THAT?’ Hiccup wrote, ‘JUST TELL MY DAD “I’M SORRY ABOUT YOUR WIFE, BUT WE HAVE TO STOP KILLING DRAGONS.”- YOU’LL BE LUCKY TO KEEP YOUR HEAD’

“Your dad is still away on the Nest Hunt,” she replied, “So we don’t have to to worry about that yet.”

An irrational shock of fear went through Hiccup. His dad had been going on nest hunts almost as long as he could remember. All those times he’d never once doubted if his father would return - Stoick always came back. Now though, he knew firsthand the dangers his father faced.

“Oh gods help him,” Hiccup murmured, “He has no idea what he’s sailing into.”

“Are you even listening to me?” Astrid asked, irritation creeping into her tone.

Hiccup blinked. He’d been so preoccupied that he’d missed whatever she’d just said. He shook his head sheepishly.

“As I was saying: We need to focus on what we can do at the moment. Which means means you need to get out of this hole in the ground.”

‘I’VE TRIED’ Hiccup wrote with a groan. ‘I CAN’T FLY, AND I CAN’T CLIMB THE WALLS’

“You have the body of a dragon, Hiccup,” she said matter-of-factly, “You can fly. You just need to figure out how/”

Hiccup groaned inwardly. At least the rain will have softened the ground, he thought.

“How can I help?” Astrid asked. When Hiccup gave her a blank stare, she explained “When I learned to fight I would practice my techniques until I thought they were perfect and then show them to my uncle; he would point out things that I’d have never seen by myself. So, how can I help?”

‘I HAVE NO IDEA,’ Hiccup wrote in response, ‘JUST STAND BACK.’

Reluctantly he turned away from Astrid and clambered atop his boulder. He spread his wings to their fullest extent and took in a deep breath. A stiff breeze rustled the trees on the clifftops, and he felt it gently press against his wing membranes. He fixed his gaze on the cliff opposite him, and exhaled slowly. When his lungs were empty, he took in another breath and leapt.

And just like every time before it, he plummeted to the ground, landing in an ungainly tangle with a wet squelch.

‘SEE?’ Hiccup wrote once he’d shaken off the worst of the mud. ‘I CAN’T FLY’

“Have you tried just gliding?” Astrid asked. “You looked okay until you tried flapping your wings.”

Hiccup shook his head and, grumbling to himself, scrambled back onto the boulder. He opened his wings, and locked them straight. He held that posture, focusing on keeping his wings straight and level, then jumped.

His flight lasted longer than any of his previous efforts. Meaning he managed almost a full second of level gliding before he drifted off to one side, attempted to correct his course, and promptly fell out of the sky.
Half an hour later they’d a dozen different variations of wing position and flapping and gliding, and hadn’t managed any improvement over his first attempt.

“Come on Hiccup,” Astrid encouraged, “if you want to get out of here, you have to keep trying.”

Hiccup groaned wordlessly. His whole body ached, and he was covered in mud from nose to tail. On his last jump he’d managed to land on a rock half-buried in the ground and had cracked a cluster of scales on his chest.

Astrid sighed, finally taking pity on him. “Okay, you can have a break,” she said, sitting down on a rock next to his head. “You’re not going to attack me this time, right?” she asked, reaching for a pouch on her belt.

If he still could, Hiccup would have blushed furiously. He scrambled into a sitting position and shook his head emphatically.

Astrid opened the bag, and-

Poison, Sickness, Madness, DEATH!

Hiccup gagged and nearly brought up the deer he’d eaten earlier. His feet slipped in the mud as he scrambled to get away from the death that Astrid held - what was that !?

After putting several body-lengths between himself and Astrid, Hiccup managed to regain control of his body. He stood on all four paws, spine arched in the air and claws sunk into the loam, breathing shallowly. Whatever Astrid had in that bag stank, worse than old Mildew’s tanning vats on the far side of the island, worse even than when he’d stumbled upon the decomposing body of a wild boar at the bottom of a ravine a few summers ago.

“Hiccup? Are you alright?” Astrid was crouched in a battle stance beside the rock she had been sat on a moment ago. The bag of death sat on the ground next to the stone. It slowly dawned on her that she wasn’t in any immediate danger, and she cautiously stood up. “What’s the matter, Hiccup?” she asked in a concerned tone.

Hiccup hissed and jerked his head towards the bag of death.

“This?” Astrid asked, picking up the bag. She reached inside and pulled out a long, thin fillet of greyish-brown meat. The stench of death increased. “It’s smoked eel, Hiccup,” she explained. “I was going to eat it for hádegismatur .”

Hiccup narrowed his eyes, focusing on the object in her hand. Eel had never been his favourite food - only brought out when their stocks of fish and other meats had been exhausted - but he’d never had such an adverse reaction to it before.

Astrid looked at her meal for a moment, then seemingly made a decision and tossed the bag over her shoulder, where it landed and sank with a splash.

Hiccup experimentally took in a deep breath. When he didn’t immediately gag, he cautiously padded towards her.

“What in Odin’s name was that?” She asked.

‘I HAVE NO IDEA’ Hiccup wrote in reply. ‘IT SMELT BAD - LIKE IT WAS ROTTEN, BUT WORSE SOMEHOW.’
“I got it out of the smokehouse myself this morning, and it definitely wasn’t rotten.”

A thought suddenly struck Hiccup: Why did they always have preserved eel to eat, even on years when the dragons had devoured all their other food stores? *Perhaps eels are poisonous to dragons, and they all react like I just did.* He thought. He raised his claw to share his idea with Astrid, only to discover that she wasn’t standing in front of him.

A sharp crack of breaking wood resounded around the cove. Hiccup spun around to see Astrid slowly spinning a large stick about the length of a good-sized *Ulfberht* blade. Seemingly satisfied with it, she tightened her grip, and turned back towards him. “Well, if you can’t fly, and won’t let me eat in peace,” she said, “we may as well try and do something useful.”

She paused about twice the branch’s length away, and leveled it at him. “Attack me.”

Hiccup blinked. *Surely he hadn’t heard that right?*

“Attack me,” she repeated. When he remained stationary, she sighed and rolled her eyes. “Look Hiccup, I know you don’t want to hurt anyone, but if someone from the village, or worse, another dragon finds this place, you need to be able to defend yourself. At the moment, if you fight as well as you fly, you won’t last a minute against someone who knows what they’re doing. Now, *Attack me!*”

Hiccup cringed inwardly; he had a feeling Astrid wouldn’t give up on this until she got what she wanted. “Fine,” he said and half-heartedly swung a paw at her.

She almost casually stepped inside his swing and thrust her improvised sword at his chest. Despite his scales and the primitive nature of the weapon, the blow *hurt*. “Dead,” she pronounced coldly.

Hiccup sighed and sat back on his haunches.

Astrid looked up and met his gaze. “I’m putting a lot on the line to help you,” she said. “I *stole* from the village for Odin’s sake! I don’t want it to all be for nothing when you get yourself killed. So please, take this seriously.” She paused, then continued in a softer tone. “I don’t want you to die Hiccup, and this is the only way I know to help.”

*Woah.* That brought Hiccup up short. *When had she started caring about what happened to him? Probably about the time you turned into a Night Fury.*

Hiccup pushed that thought away. She was right; as much as he tried to avoid thinking about what would happen if the Berkians discovered him, he didn’t want to die on the end of some Viking’s blade, and Astrid was offering him a way to protect himself.

He shuffled his feet, then, without warning, lunged forwards, aiming to grab the stick between his jaws. Astrid calmly sidestepped and brought her ‘sword’ down on the back of his neck in an overhand blow.

"Dead," she repeated. "I saw you shift your stance before you attacked; don't give your opponent time to react."

Trying not to show what he was doing, Hiccup glanced at Astrid out the corner of his eye. She was standing just in front and to the right of him; easily within striking distance. He swung at her legs with his right forepaw. Astrid hopped backwards, avoiding the blow. Before he could recover, she darted around him and stabbed at his exposed side.
"Dead."

Hiccup backed up a couple of paces and stared her down for a couple heartbeats. Letting out what he hoped was an intimidating roar, he charged her. She sidestepped again, and scraped her stick down his flank as he passed.

"Dead."

Hiccup let out a short growl of frustration. *All this is teaching me is that I'm just as useless in a fight now as I was before.*

"Even the strongest warrior can be defeated if her opponent out-thinks her," Astrid said. "You brought down a *Night Fury*, Hiccup; you can fight smarter than this."

'YOU SAID YOU WANTED ME TO DEFEND MYSELF’ Hiccup wrote. 'SO WHY AM I ATTACKING YOU?’

“I could try and teach you to block and dodge,” she began, “but that’s only prolonging a fight, and in an extended battle, experience always wins. If you get into a fight, your best chance of staying alive is to end it quickly."

Hiccup nodded; as much as he found the thought of hurting one of the villagers distasteful, he couldn't fault her logic. Astrid returned the gesture and raised her stick.

Rather than rushing straight into an attack, Hiccup hung back and studied her. Astrid moved around to the right and he sidestepped left, circling. *How should he attack?* She would expect him to make another straightforward attack; perhaps he could use that to his advantage.

Hiccup bounded forwards two paces and swung his left forepaw at her head. When Astrid made to duck under his blow, he swiped at her legs with his other paw. She saw the second strike coming at the last moment and quickly stepped back. Hiccup's paws hit the ground with a thump and he quickly scrambled back to avoid a counterattack.

"Better," she said, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. She raised her weapon and they returned to sizing each other up. He started to consider his next move when she suddenly let out a furious battle cry and charged.

Hiccup froze in shock. A moment later her stick struck him squarely on top of his head and his legs went out from under him.

"Dead."

Hiccup looked up at her, blinking the stars out of his eyes. "What the Hel was that for?" He growled.

"In a real fight, a warrior isn't just going to stand there and wait for you to hit them," she replied calmly.

An idea occurred to Hiccup and he acted on it without thinking. Spinning around, he whipped his tail at her. He heard Astrid move, and his tail whistled through empty air. Undeterred, he followed through his motion and leapt at her. She sidestepped his jump, but before she could stab at his flank again he dropped his legs and rolled away.

“Now that’s more like it,” Astrid whispered.
Just as he had adapted to walking on four legs, Hiccup found that their mock fights went better if he didn’t concentrate too hard on the motion of his limbs; his muscles seemed to know what to do, although they invariably ended in his ‘death’.

As the minutes ticked by, and their bouts stretched out from short exchanges of blows to contests that lasted up to several minutes, Hiccup surprisingly began to enjoy himself. Boredom had been his only companion for most of his time in the cove, and once he found that he could trust his body to move as he directed, he devoted his mind to coming up with new ways to attack. He relished the challenge of thinking on his feet and trying to surprise Astrid.

However, with his newfound enjoyment eventually came frustration as his innate - albeit long-buried - competitiveness arose: Despite his best efforts, their duels invariably ended in his ‘death’.

With a growl, he reared up on his hind legs to slash at Astrid when she suddenly darted forwards and stabbed at his underbelly. “Dead,” she panted.

Hiccup wobbled, unbalanced and she quickly stepped out of the way before he crashed back down on top of her.

Astrid glanced up at the sky before she raised her stick again. “Last time,” she announced.

Hiccup narrowed his eyes as they began to circle. An idea struck him. It was a dirty trick, but it might just work, and his pride demanded that he best her at least once.

Astrid began to raise her weapon, drawing in breath for a battle cry.

*Now or never.*

Hiccup sharply inhaled and spat a small fireball at the ground before her. Astrid gasped, stumbled back, and he leapt. His jump carried him through the cloud of dirt thrown up by his shot. He struck Astrid square-on; his momentum carrying them to the ground.

“Dead,” he growled softly.

“Let’s... call this one a draw,” Astrid gasped.

Hiccup felt something sharp press into his armpit. He looked down. Her belt-knife had somehow found it’s way into her grip, and she was holding it against the delicate skin underneath his right foreleg.

Hiccup let out a breath and awkwardly let her up.

“In a real fight, you wouldn’t have caught me off guard with the fire like that,” she grumbled as she tried in vain to brush the mud from her clothes.

Hiccup only half-heard her; his mind still reeling from the fact that he’d beaten Astrid in a fight.

He barely paid her any attention as she retrieved her weapons and bade him farewell - promising to return as soon as she could.

Hiccup stood there for a while after she left, replaying the events of the last hour or so in his mind. Yes, he’d taken her by surprise with his fire, and it probably wouldn’t work again, but even before then, he’d been holding his own - He’d even *enjoyed* it! An ugly question began to circle in his head, accompanying the memories:
If he somehow eventually found a way back to being human, would he even recognise the person he’d become?

Chapter End Notes

Icelandic:
djöfla - demons
hádegismatur - lunch

Ulfberht - An inscription commonly found on sword blades of the Viking period, a trademark of sorts.
Chapter 7: Faith

“Astrid?”

The elder Hofferson child groaned wordlessly. It felt like barely an instant had passed since she’d finally closed her eyes to rest; it couldn’t be time to get up again.

“Aisid?”

Astrid wrenched her eyes open. Bright sunlight shone through the crack in her shutters, illuminating her younger brother’s face as he stood in her doorway.

“Orvar,” she murmured, “What time is it?”

“About two hours after dawn,” he replied, “Mother said that you need to get up now, or you’ll be late for training.”

Astrid was suddenly, instantly awake, a dark sense of foreboding settling on her chest. Dragon training. Ruffnut had intercepted her shortly after she’d returned from Hiccup’s cove, and had cheerfully informed her that they were facing the Hideous Zippleback in the ring today.

“Astrid!” A muffled female voice rose through the floorboards.

“I’m up!” she shouted downstairs, before turning to her younger sibling. “Go on,” she told him, “I’ll be down in a minute.”

As soon as her brother left the room, she kicked off the covers and rolled out of bed. Mechanically, she went through the motions of dressing and putting on her armour - making sure to secure the leatherwrapped package she’d prepared the previous night to her belt, Finally, she grabbed her axe and headed downstairs, where her mother slopped a ladle of lukewarm porridge into a bowl.

Astrid yawned, then began quickly shovelling her breakfast into her mouth. She’d been lying awake half the night wrestling with her problems; both the immediate one of dealing with the Zippleback now that she knew it was an innocent, intelligent creature, and the more long-term problems of how to keep Hiccup and Stormfly alive without drawing suspicion.

She was pushing herself hard, and she knew it: with the dragon raid two nights ago, and her missions to help Hiccup and Stormfly, it felt like weeks since she’d gotten a proper night’s sleep. However, she had no other option: she couldn’t allow Hiccup to die, and she owed her life to Stormfly; she couldn’t allow harm to come to the Nadder either.

She was the last to arrive at the ring. As she jogged the final few steps towards the entrance, she noticed that the water cart they used for fighting fires during dragon raids was stood beside the gates. What’s that doing here?

“Now that we’re finally all here,” Gobber began, with a pointed look at her. “Everybody put down your weapons, and pick up a bucket.”
Nobody moved. Astrid forced herself not to breathe an audible sigh of relief.

“P-Put down our weapons?” Fishlegs stammered.

“You heard me,” the old smith bellowed, “Now get moving!”

Fishlegs jumped in surprise, and quickly scrambled to pick up a bucket and fill it from the cart. Grumbling to themselves, the rest of the group followed suit, and they all filed into the arena.

The portcullis slammed closed behind them. The others muttered under their breath and shifted uncomfortably as Gobber approached the Zippleback’s cage. He pulled the release, and the doors slammed open, spilling out a cloud of pale green smoke that began to quickly fill the arena.

“Today’s lesson is about teamwork,” Gobber began.

Astrid looked over and met Ruffnut’s eyes. She nodded briefly and moved to put her back to Astrid’s.

“A wet dragon head can’t light it’s fire,” Gobber continued. The smoke billowed around them, rapidly obscuring the boys where they’d stood a few paces away. It smelt faintly of rotten eggs. “The Hideous Zippleback is *extra* tricky. One head *breathes* gas, the other head *lights* it. Your job is to know which is which.”

Astrid glanced around, feeling a prickle of nervousness in her gut. The smoke had effectively blinded them. Something moved in the corner of her eye, and she snapped her head around, only to be faced with formless, swirling clouds of vapour.

“Stay close,” she whispered to Ruff.

“Razor sharp, serrated teeth that inject venom for pre-digestion,” Fishlegs rambled nervously, his voice sounding strangely distant through the smoke. “Prefers ambush attack, by crushing its victims—”

“Would you please *shut up!*” Tuffnut snapped.

“If that dragon shows either of its faces,” Snotlout put in, “I’m going to—There!”

A shadow moved through the smoke. Astrid and Ruffnut span to face it as one.

A bucket load of cold water splashed in their faces.

“It’s us! *Idiots!*” Astrid hissed.

“Your butts must be getting bigger,” Tuffnut shot back, “We thought you were a dragon.”

Astrid felt her friend bristle beside her. “Ruffnut, don—”

Too late. With a growl Ruffnut threw her bucket at her brother, then raced after it. Tuffnut fled, and the two disappeared into the fog.

Astrid turned to Snotlout. “Don’t worry babe,” he drawled confidently, “I’ve got this.”

Before she could respond, a sharp cry of surprise from Fishlegs echoed off the arena walls, followed by a scream of pain. Snotlout’s face blanched.

Astrid took a step in the direction the sound had come from, then looked over her shoulder.
Snotlout hadn’t moved.

“Snotlout!” She hissed. “Come on!”

He blinked at her words, but made no attempt to follow her.

A monstrous shadow moved at the edge of her vision, followed by a soft whimpering of terror. She glanced back; Snotlout was still frozen in place. Silently cursing the moment he chose to run out of bravado, she turned her back on him and stalked into the smoke.

Within a couple steps, Snotlout had vanished behind her, leaving her alone in the fog. A few paces later, she began to make out the shadows of the roof-chains above her. The smoke’s thinning out, she realised.

No sooner had that thought crossed her mind, she heard a furious hissing, and span to see a pair of serpentine heads converging on her. Almost before she’d consciously processed what she saw, her arms moved, tossing her load of water at the nearest head.

The Zippleback jerked in shock at the water. The head she’d targeted reared back and breathed a jet of thick, green gas at her. Wrong head.

Astrid threw the now empty bucket at the dragon, and staggered backwards, coughing as she breathed in the noxious green cloud. She desperately fanned her hands before her face, trying to create some clean air to fill her burning lungs.

Through tear-filled eyes, she watched as the Zippleback’s second head descended upon her. With one snap of its jaws it would create a shower of sparks and ignite it’s deadly vapour. They wouldn’t need a barrow to bury what was left of her.

Astrid met the dragon’s bulging, terror-filled eyes as it’s head lowered into the smoke. She reached down and found the drawstring of the pouch on her belt.

The dragon’s jaws opened.

Astrid closed her eyes and pulled.

The Zippleback’s claws scrabbled frantically on the arena floor.

She opened her eyes to see the dragon cringing away from her, almost tripping over itself in its haste to retreat. It beat its wings in terror, quickly dissipating the smoke around her.

Astrid let out her breath; the eel she’d concealed in the pouch at her waist had worked. Thank you, Hiccup she thought.

One of the dragon’s flailing wings swung towards her and she ducked at the last moment, cursing. Focus, she told herself, the eel trick may have worked, but someone could still get hurt.

She stepped forwards and snatched up a length of wood from her bucket, which had shattered under one of the Zippleback’s feet. Holding the broken plank before her like a weapon, she began to herd the dragon backwards towards its cage. It was all too eager to avoid her - or at least the eel she carried - and a few tense seconds later she’d managed to back it into it’s alcove in the arena wall.

Quickly untying the pouch from her belt, she tossed the eel in after the dragon, and while it was distracted, threw her weight against one of the huge iron doors that secured the cage. She heard a
screech of metal beside her, and looked over to see Gobber pushing at the second door, scowling with effort.

The doors slammed closed and locked with a metallic _clang_. Astrid rested her back against them, breathing heavily. Gradually the rest of the group converged on her and Gobber; the twins approaching in silence from one direction, bearing chagrined expressions, while Fishlegs limped in from the other side, leaning heavily on Snoutlout. He favoured his right leg, which was stained crimson from the knee down.

“You’re lucky,” Gobber growled in the direction of the latter pair. “I cut out the Zippleback’s venom sacs before putting it into training.”

Astrid tried not to wince visibly; the operation must have been unimaginably painful for the dragon.

“Now go get your sorry asses to Gothi’s!” he bellowed, then turned on the twins. “I hope that this was a lesson to you two about the importance of always, _always_ watching your shield-mate’s back.”

He paused for a moment, letting out a long breath through his teeth. Finally, he nodded to her.

“Good job, Astrid. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a village to run.”

With that, he turned away and hobbled swiftly out of the arena.

It turned out that Fishlegs’ wound looked worse than it actually was; by evening he was released to join the training group as they congregated in the great hall.

“Zipplebacks rely on their fire or poison to kill their victims,” he explained, “Without venom, their bite is only a few small puncture wounds. Gothi says it might not even scar.”

“Pity,” Ruffnut commented, “I like a man with scars.”

Fishlegs suddenly turned pink. “Oh... I... Uh...” he stammered.

Tuffnut mimed a retching motion. “Anyway,” he said a little too loudly, turning towards Astrid. “You have to show me the move you used in the arena, I’ve never seen a dragon act like that before!”

“Yeah,” Snotlout commented, “That was so you, Astrid.”

She sensed the eyes of the group focus on her, and felt a momentary stab of panic.

“I...” she nervously brushed at her fringe. “I was just sort of reacting in the moment, I don’t know if I could do it again.”

“Oh...” Tuffnut sounded disappointed.

“Hear that?” Snotlout said, “She’s a natural. Just like me.”

“No you’re not!”

“Yes I am! I could have beaten that dragon, she just did it first.

Astrid looked away, tuning out the boys as they began to bicker. Inevitably her thoughts drifted to the two dragons in her care. She was confident enough in her hunting ability that she could provide
for Hiccup. However, that still left Stormfly; she couldn’t sneak into the ring in the dead of night whenever she needed to see the dragon - it would only be a matter of time before she slipped up and somebody noticed her.

As she wrestled with the dilemma, her gaze wandered aimlessly about the room, eventually settling on Gobber. The Smith was sat alone at the chief’s high table, staring into the bottom of a tankard.

Suddenly, it hit her: The dragons in the ring may be treated abysmally, but they didn’t starve to death, which meant somebody already had regular access to them. Excusing herself, she made her way up to the chief’s dais.

“Sir?” Gobber looked up from his drink. Astrid could see dark circles beneath his eyes - running the village in Stoick’s absence was clearly wearing on him.

“Do you want something Astrid?”

“I was wondering,” she began, “The dragons in the ring - the ones we use for training - aren’t dying of hunger so-”

“Aye,” Gobber cut in, “I feed them. There’s slots in the cage doors; I usually take leftovers from the kitchens down for them twice a week.” His eyes went distant. “Although I haven’t had time to recently…”

“I could do that for you,” she offered, trying to sound innocently helpful.

Gobber eyed her suspiciously.

“I don’t have to let the dragons out of their cages,” she continued. “So I won’t be in any danger. And you’ve seen that I can handle myself if something goes wrong.”

Gobber hesitated, deliberating. Astrid silently urged him to agree.

“Go on then,” the smith said with a great expulsion of breath. “It’s your funeral. Speak to Dagmar in the kitchens sometime tomorrow, and tell her I sent you, she’ll get you what you need.”

“Thank you sir,” Astrid said, nodding to him respectfully. As she left the high table, her steps felt lighter than they had since she first followed Hiccup into the woods. She might not have any idea how she was going to free Stormfly from the arena, or get Hiccup turned back into a human, but at least she no longer felt like she was struggling to keep her head above water.

Astrid awoke the next morning faced with a novel conundrum: The next bout of dragon training wouldn’t be for a couple of days, and she wasn’t going to feed the training dragons - and see Stormfly again - until that evening. She didn’t have any duties at home or in the village; so, she was faced with the rare prospect of a day to spend however she pleased.

As she went about her morning routine, she’d thought about what to do with herself. Before, she would have spent any free moment that she had training with her axe. Now though, imagining herself inflicting deathblow after deathblow on dragons of every size and shape held no appeal for her. Nor was there any other reason for practicing with her weapon; with a common enemy in the dragons, the last Viking raid in the Archipelago had been years before she was born.

Eventually she’d settled upon spending the day on a hunting expedition into the woods. Even though she had fed Hiccup just the day before, she reasoned that by providing food, she was still
helping the village, and that if she brought some kills back, nobody would question her actions when she was hunting for the heir-turned-Night-Fury.

She paused and adjusted the bow slung across her back, trying in vain to stop the stiff bowstring from rubbing uncomfortably at her breasts as she walked. The weapon had never been her favourite - she preferred to deal with her opponents up close, or to use a thrown knife or hatchet if she couldn't close range. Of course, she'd still drilled with the bow until she was at least a competent markswoman - one couldn’t hunt deer with a battleaxe, after all.

Astrid sighed irritably, glaring at the narrow, winding game trail beneath her feet. She’d been wandering the forest all morning, and the only sign of life that she’d seen were a set of faded day-old deer tracks. Looking around, she realised that her route had brought her close to Hiccup’s cove. Almost before she’d consciously decided to, she found her legs carrying her off the trail and towards the hidden entrance.

When she entered the cove, Hiccup was lying on a rock in the late autumn sunlight, his eyes closed. He yawned as she called his name, then rose to his paws and stretched, arching his back in a distinctly feline motion.

He hopped down from the rock, and padded over to her.

'HI ASTRID' he wrote.

"Hi Hiccup," she returned, feeling suddenly uncomfortable.

'TO WHAT DO I OWE THE PLEASURE?"

"I..." Astrid hesitated - why was she here? - “I didn’t have anything else to do today, so I thought you might appreciate some company.” She looked up at the rock he’d lain on, “Although it seems like you’ve found a way to pass the time.”

Hiccup looked down at his paws and made several soft, mumbling sounds.

“What is it, Hiccup?” she prompted.

‘I THINK I’M NOCTURNAL’ he wrote eventually.

Her confusion obviously showed on her face, as he began to write an explanation before she could form a question.

‘I THINK ALL NIGHT FURIES ARE - BRIGHT SUNLIGHT MAKES ME SLEEPY, AND THEN I WAKE UP WHEN IT GETS DARK’

“That makes sense,” Astrid realised, “Dragon raids always happen at night, and your scales would make you invisible against a dark sky.”

‘ALMOST INVISIBLE,’ Hiccup corrected, ‘I HIT ONE, REMEMBER?’

“Yes you did,” Astrid agreed. “Although, going to confront it on your own with just your belt-knife wasn’t the best idea, even by your standards.”

Hiccup’s pupils narrowed, and a barely audible growl rumbled in his throat - she wondered if he was even conscious of it.

‘WHAT ELSE WAS I GOING TO DO?’ he wrote. ‘I TRIED TO TELL EVERYONE.’
Astrid suddenly felt terrible. He had tried to tell them, although, of course, none of them had believed that him, the weakling, the hiccup, had actually brought down the Night Fury. Gods, even she hadn’t really believed his claims when she’d tailedd him that morning. If only we’d listened, she thought, then this whole mess might not have happened.

“Hiccup, I’m sorry, I...” What could she possibly say? She was as guilty for shunning him as the rest of the village.

‘I KNOW. BUT YOU BELIEVED ME WHEN IT MATTERED. THANK YOU.’

Astrid blinked several times - her eyes suddenly watering. How could it be that simple? She’d conspired to cut him off from almost all social contact with his generation, and made his life about as miserable as a free man’s could be; and because of one action made on a hunch, all those years were forgotten? How could he be that forgiving?

_He was forgiving enough to let that Night Fury go just because it looked scared, she thought. What makes you special?

Astrid stared at him, realising that beneath the scales, behind those reptilian eyes, she knew next to nothing about the mind of the boy she’d supposedly grown up with.

“What was it like?” she asked softly, “I mean, we - I - treated you pretty terribly, how did you...?”

Hiccup twitched his wings in a draconic shrug. ‘I GOT USED TO IT. I JUST TRIED TO MAKE THE BEST OF WHAT I’D BEEN GIVEN IN LIFE.’

“All those years, all those schemes...” she breathed. “Why didn’t you just give up?”

‘I’M THE CHIEF’S SON - STOICK’S REPUTATION WOULD’VE NEVER RECOVERED IF I BECAME A SIMPLE FARMER OR SMITH.’ He hesitated, shuffling his paws in the dirt. ‘AND I HOPED THAT ONE DAY HE’D LOOK AT ME LIKE HE LOOKED AT YOU - WITHOUT THAT DISAPPOINTED SCOWL ON HIS FACE’

Years-old words of her own father echoed in her mind. “You were born a girl, and a Hofferson,” Balder had said. “That means you need to work doubly hard for them to see past your name and body, and see your skills. You can’t change that; you can either give up, or you can train.”

“I...” she began haltingly, “I think I know how you felt.”

Hiccup’s head-frills twitched, but he didn’t write anything.

“You know about what happened to my uncle?” Hiccup nodded. “Well, after he... left, the Hofferson family name was muck. It’s too late for my father, so it’s my responsibility to win back our honour. That’s why I spent almost every spare moment practicing for Dragon Training. It was only thanks to my mother - and my father’s fishing voyages - that I got to have any time with our friends.”

‘WOW, ASTRID. I NEVER KNEW THAT.’

“Well, it was a matter of family shame, we didn’t exactly shout it out in the village square.” She thought about his last confrontation with the chief - minutes before his fateful trip into the woods - “Unlike you and Stoick.”

Hiccup snorted. ‘HE’S A VIKING CHIEF - SUBTLETY ISN’T IN HIS VOCABULARY.’
Over the next few hours, through her hesitant, stumbling sentences, and his painstakingly scratched lines of runes, they shared the experiences of their respective childhoods. In that relatively short time, Astrid learned more about the Haddock heir than she had in a lifetime in Berk. They had been the best and worst Vikings of their generation - seemingly the antithesis of each other - and yet they had more in common than she could have possibly realised: They had both struggled under the weight of familial expectation, and had both been denied social contact with others of their generation as a result.

Astrid left the cove at sunset feeling strangely both heavier and lighter than she had when she entered; lighter, for having shared her struggles with her family’s shame, but also heavier, for having heard what she and the rest of the village had unknowingly done to Hiccup.

The end result was that she was even more determined to find a way to bring Hiccup back home. She’d never told another soul why she’d devoted her childhood to becoming the best dragon-slayer she could, even Ruffnut - with whom she shared a bond of female comradeship as the only other girl of her age in the village.

Before, she’d wanted to return Hiccup home out of concern for Stoick; now she wanted to bring him back for his sake.

The sun was setting, making the clouds above her glow brilliant orange, when Astrid returned to the training ring. Thankfully, Berk was far enough south that they never lost the sun completely, however the shortening days told her that winter and the scant few hours of daylight it allowed them would soon arrive.

Setting down the two heavy containers of scraps she’d carried from the mead hall, she cranked open the portcullis and stepped into the ring. Her eyes were immediately drawn to Stormfly’s cage. No, she told herself, See to the other dragons first, then her.

She eyed the two containers of food she’d been given. Hiccup and Stormfly had both devoured similarly-sized baskets of whole fish in a single meal; the scraps she had would be barely more than a snack for the five dragons.

Well, it’s better than nothing, she thought, carrying the first basket towards the Gronckle’s cage. No, she told herself, See to the other dragons first, then her.

She located the slot in the door that Gobber had described, and wrenched it open with a screech of metal. Immediately she heard a growl from within the alcove and something heavy rammed into the doors. She flinched and jumped back.

Heart pounding in her ears, she quickly shoveled about a third of the ‘food’ - an unpleasant mixture of offal and half-eaten leftovers - through the slot, and slammed it shut, trying to ignore the soft squelching sounds as the dragon consumed it’s meal. Taking a deep breath, she moved onto the next cage and repeated the process.

However, when she reached the penultimate cage - the Zippleback’s - something strange happened. There was no movement from within when she opened the feeding slot. Even after she deposited the food and closed the hatch, no sound came from within. Shrugging to herself, Astrid was about to turn away when she suddenly remembered the eel that she’d thrown into the cage the day before. She didn’t know why dragons found the creatures so repulsive, but being trapped in a confined space with one was probably torture for the Zippleback.

Glancing around furtively, Astrid quickly heaved downwards on the lever that opened the massive doors. Sure enough, the eel was still there, lying on the stone floor, near the centre of the alcove.
The Zippleback fixed her with a wide-eyed stare and hissed agitatedly as she approached. It cringed away from her, cramming its bulk even tighter into the far corner of the cell. Edging closer, Astrid noticed that the floor and walls around the dragon were covered with fresh scratch marks.

“I’m sorry,” Astrid murmured to the dragon, “but I had to find a way to subdue you without hurting you.”

The dragon didn’t respond, so she crept forwards and bent to pick up the eel. “I’ll get rid of this now.”

The Zippleback watched her warily as she slowly stood and backed out of the cage. As soon as the doors slammed shut, she heard it lurch forwards and inhale its pile of scraps. Astrid looked at the eel in her hand for a moment, then quickly threw it into the empty food basket, wiping her slimy fingers on her leggings.

At last she could turn to her real reason for being in the ring. Despite herself, she felt her heart fluttering with nervous anticipation as she approached the Deadly Nadder’s cell. She found herself hesitating as she rested her hands on the release lever - Yes, Stormfly had saved her life, but perhaps the Nadder was simply repaying her debt for repairing her wing, she had no way of knowing if the dragon would be friendly upon seeing her again. You keep telling yourself you're trying to help her, part of her whispered, but you're still her jailer.

She pushed down on the lever, then took a deep breath and stepped into the mouth of the cage. “Hey Stormfly,” she began, still not quite used to talking to a dragon. “It’s-”

She never finished that sentence, as with a sudden squawk, the Nadder rushed out of the alcove and butted her in the chest - hard enough to wind her - and began to nuzzle her fiercely.

“Hey girl,” Astrid wheezed, raising a hand to rest on the dragon’s neck. “I’m happy to see you too.”

Stormfly cooed and gradually slowed her motions, bringing her wings forwards to encircle the two of them. Astrid gently patted and stroked the Nadder’s head, wondering at her sudden display of affection. Eventually, it dawned on her: she was probably the first creature to show kindness to Stormfly after gods only know how long in captivity - anyone was bound to be a little over-emotional after that.

“Don’t worry girl,” she whispered to the dragon, “I’m not going anywhere.”

Stormfly crooned affectionately, and held her close for several seconds, before at last folding her wings and slowly pulling away. The evening air felt suddenly cold on Astrid’s exposed arms.

“Hey girl,” Astrid began, dragging over the remaining food container. “I brought you something to eat.”

She set the container down in front of the dragon and Stormfly lowered her head towards it. She sniffed at the contents, then snorted in disgust and looked up at her.

“I know,” she said apologetically. “But it’s all they’d give me, and I can’t always steal food for you.”

Stormfly grunted and stuck her head into the basket, and in a few seconds her meagre ration was gone.

Astrid stepped around towards the Nadder’s injured wing. Stormfly raised her head from the
basket, and followed her with her gaze, but otherwise allowed her to approach. “Can I take a look?” she asked, cautiously extending a hand.

Stormfly chirped and extended her wing to its fullest extent. Astrid leaned in close, examining the wound. “Huh, you healed quicker than I thought,” she observed out loud. Where there had been a bleeding rent in Stormfly’s wing membrane a couple days ago, there was now only a slight ridge of pale scar tissue, criss-crossed by the dark threads she’d used to close it.

“It looks like the stitches can come out now,” she told the dragon. Cautiously she reached for the hilt of her belt-knife - the very same knife that had sliced through the wing membrane now held inches from her face. “Don’t move,” she instructed, “I’ll try to make this as quick as possible.”

Not quite believing what she was about to do, she drew the knife and raised it to the wing. Stormfly grunted softly and shifted slightly - locking her wing straight, but otherwise didn’t react to the blade held less than an inch from the most vulnerable part of her body.

For a moment, Astrid marveled at the trust Stormfly was giving her, then she gritted her teeth and focused on her task. She gently slipped the point of the knife underneath one of the threads, then with a swift jerk, sliced through the cord. Letting a soft sigh of relief, she moved the knife lower down the wound and repeated the process. It took several tense minutes for Astrid to cut each of the stitches, then carefully pull each length of severed thread from the membrane. When she’d finished, a small trickle of blood ran down Stormfly’s wing from the puncture wounds left behind by the thread, but it was already drying up. Aside from that, the Nadder’s wing was whole again.

Stormfly swung her head round and nosed at her scar, then shuffled backwards and gave her wings a few experimental flaps. Letting out a satisfied hum, she began to fold her wings. Halfway through the motion, she froze, fixating on a point behind Astrid.

“Stormfly, what-” Horrible realisation struck her.

She spun around.

The portcullis over the entrance was still latched wide open.

Stormfly bolted. She crossed the arena floor faster than Astrid at a full sprint.

This was it. All her carefully made plans would come to nothing.

“Stormfly, wait!” she cried in pure desperation.

The Nadder’s claws skidded on the ground as she came to a stop just before the gates. She turned her head back towards Astrid, blinking.

Breathless, Astrid caught up to her and positioned herself between the dragon and the exit - not that she could stop the Nadder if she decided to leave anyway.

“I’m sorry Stormfly,” she began breathlessly, “You can’t leave, not now.” Panic was surging in her chest, and she suddenly found herself holding back tears. “I promise I’ll get you out of here someday, but please listen to me.”

Stormfly blinked slowly, and tilted her head in silent question.

“Thankyou, Thank you.” She took several deep breaths, trying to reign in her emotions and organise her thoughts. “There’s another dragon that’s depending on me.” Stormfly twitched slightly in surprise. “He’s a Night Fury, he used to be our chief’s son, but another Night Fury
transformed into one somehow. Now, he can’t fly or hunt, and he’s relying on me to bring food to
him.” Stormfly’s only movement was the gentle expansion and contraction of her chest as she
breathed. “If I let you go now, they - the others from the village - will know that I set you free, and
they’ll lock me up - or worse - and I won’t be able to bring food to Hiccup, and he’ll starve.”

Astrid fell silent. Hoping that her jumbled, run-on explanation was good enough. She might have
healed Stormfly’s wing, but she was asking the Nadder to give up her freedom for the sake of a
dragon she’d never met.

She counted the moments on her rapidly beating heart. She knew that Stormfly understood her
words somewhat, but could she comprehend complex ideas like the relationship between her and
Hiccup’s survival?

Her answer came in the form of a soft croon, and a snort of hot breath on her face. Astrid stared at
the dragon’s head, inches away from her own, dumbfounded.

“You understood me?” she asked, disbelieving.

Stormfly chirped.

“And you’re willing to stay? For Hiccup?”

The dragon chirped again.

“Thank you,” Astrid breathed.

Stormfly hummed softly, and lowered her head slightly. Astrid knew what she wanted. Raising her
left hand, she rested it on the dragon’s muzzle, as she had when they’d first trusted each other two
days ago. The Nadder hummed louder and pushed back into her palm.

Stormfly held the contact for a long moment, then pulled back and slowly stepped around her, out
of the ring.

Astrid trailed after the Nadder, curious, but not overly worried.

At the top of the ramp, Stormfly stopped and stretched up to her full height, spreading her wings
wide. Her eyes closed, and a purr of contentment came from the birdlike dragon. Astrid smiled,
after being in captivity for so long, she wouldn’t begrudge her a taste of fresh air. Her gaze slid past
the dragon to the horizon, where the last, almost crimson sliver of the sun was slipping beneath the
waves. After the tumultuous emotions of the last few minutes, the combination of the natural
display and cool breeze was soothing.

A chirp from Stormfly, brought her attention back to the Nadder beside her. Stormfly was
crouched low, gazing at her intently. She chirped again, jerking her head backwards, almost in a
beckoning motion.

Astrid wondered what Stormfly was trying to tell her, the dragon’s posture was so low that the
peak of her back was about the height of Astrid’s hips, if she’d wanted to she could-

No way.

She couldn’t really-

Stormfly made the beckoning motion again.
She stared at the Nadder incredulously. “You want me to ride you!?”

Stormfly chirped affirmatively and shuffled her hindquarters in excitement.

Conflicting thoughts span through Astrid’s head. At some point in their lives every Viking on the archipelago - even her - had looked up at the dragons and dreamed of what it must be like to take to the skies and soar amongst the clouds; how many times did one get the chance to actually realise that dream? No, part of her refused; helping an innocent victim of war was one thing, but to actually get onto the creature’s back...

Stormfly trilled encouragingly.

Astrid grit her teeth and pushed aside her reservations. Stormfly had trusted her when she had to right to it, it was time that she showed some faith in return.

Taking a deep breath, she placed her hands on Stormfly’s back, and with a soft grunt, swung her leg over the Nadder.

*I'm okay,* Astrid told herself as she settled into position. *Just sitting on the back of a-

“Woah!”

Stormfly lurched beneath her, and Astrid fell forwards, thrusting out her hands to avoid spearing herself on the spines sticking out the back of Stormfly’s head.

Heart pounding in her chest, she slowly sat up. The ground suddenly looked a lot further away; Stormfly had stood up. The Nadder turned her head sideways and looked back at her, warbling questioningly.

Astrid shuffled forwards, so her legs rested comfortably between the Nadder’s hips and wing-shoulders. Stormfly's muscles flexed beneath her as the dragon slowly spread her wings. Distantly, Astrid remembered riding a horse at a þing several years ago; being on dragonback was strangely similar. She exhaled slowly. "This isn't so bad..."

Stormfly suddenly crouched again, and Astrid felt the muscles beneath her tense. She had the presence of mind to tighten her legs around Stormfly's ribs, before the dragon launched into the air.

Astrid cried out in terror. Her legs clamped painfully tight around Stormfly, and she was blinded by a sudden ferocious wind. A split-second later - as their upwards velocity began to wane - she felt the muscles beneath her surge and they shot forwards, gaining height and speed. For a heart-stopping moment she felt them begin to slow and fall back. Then the wings drove again.

Minutes and seconds ceased to have meaning for Astrid as she clung to Stormfly, eyes screwed tightly shut. Her existence was defined by breath-stealing acceleration as the Nadder flapped, then a terrifying lull, before the cycle repeated. *Oh great Odin,* she prayed, *I'm sorry, just please don't let me die here.*

Then, as abruptly as their ascent had begun, it ceased.

The wind in her face dropped to a steady breeze, and the muscles beneath her stilled, flapping once every few seconds.

Gradually, Astrid unwrapped her cramped arms from around Stormfly’s neck and sat up, looking around at her surroundings.
She immediately forgot the discomfort in her limbs.

Stormfly hung in the air, suspended on two great sails of blue patterned skin. Off her right wing was a massive bulbous structure, glowing peach in the setting sun. It took Astrid a moment to realise that it was a cloud. Feeling dwarfed, she craned her neck backwards, trying to see the top; from the ground she’d never realised that clouds were so damn huge.

She turned to look out to sea, over Stormfly’s left shoulder. She had been watching the last minutes of the sunset before she got onto the dragon’s back, yet somehow, impossibly, the sun was still setting. Stormfly’s wings stilled, and they glided smoothly as Astrid watched the sun slip below the horizon in silent awe.

As twilight began to descend, Stormfly looked back at her, humming in contentment. Astrid leaned forwards and patted her on the neck, “Thank you, Stormfly,” she breathed. “This is... amazing.”

Stormfly trilled happily and banked into a slight turn. Astrid’s heart leapt into her throat for a moment, but the motion proved gentle enough that she wasn’t in any danger of falling off.

Astrid gasped as their turn brought the island into view, and she looked down on her village. From a dragon’s-eye view, her home looked pitifully small, and beyond that, fragile - was that small patch of cultivated land, surrounding a cluster of wooden buildings it?

She suddenly remembered the bright sky at their backs, and nudged Stormfly’s head away from her home. “We’d better stay away from the village,” she responded to the Nadder’s querying grunt. “We don’t want to be seen by a watchman.”

Stormfly hummed, and banked into another turn, angling away from Berk, towards the uninhabited side of the island. Astrid slowly loosened her grip on Stormfly’s neck and extended her arms at her sides, feeling the air rushing through her fingers.

She felt a girlish giggle bubble up in her chest, and escape her lips before she could stop it - she was actually flying!

While twilight ebbed, and true night approached, Astrid marveled at the wonders of Stormfly’s lofty domain. She could almost feel Stormfly’s rapture at being able to ride the winds again, and she treated her rider to a series of long sweeping turns, and gradual climbs and descents from the tops of the clouds, to just above the wave-caps.

Her fear completely forgotten, Astrid didn’t want to ever come down. However her body had other ideas; the continual motion of Stormfly’s wings caused her scales to chafe against Astrid’s thighs, and the constant, driving wind sliced through her thin clothing, stealing the heat from her body.

By the time the Moon rose - and Berk lit up with a multitude of glittering torches - she felt a faint sense of relief when Stormfly began to glide back down towards the ring.

Astrid braced herself as they came in over the cliffs, and let out a grunt of pain as the shock of landing traveled up through Stormfly’s legs to her own hips. The nadder ran forwards a few steps - shedding her remaining momentum - then came to a stop. Astrid took her cue, and slid down from Stormfly’s back, allowing the dragon to fold her wings against her flanks.

Her legs gave out when they hit the ground, and she would have fallen, if not for Stormfly lunging forwards and catching her with her snout. “Thanks girl,” she gasped, pulling herself up by the dragon’s neck. She held the contact, reluctant to let go of the dragon that had just shown her the skies. “Thank you,” she repeated, “for everything.”
Stormfly chuffed in response, then pulled away and - without prompting - ducked back into the arena.

Astrid’s hands unconsciously balled into fists as she followed Stormfly across the ring, back to her prison. With a start, she realised that she hated the war, she hated that this would forever mar the memory of her wondrous flight with Stormfly.

Her gaze met the Nadder’s as she turned in her alcove. If the dragon could speak, Astrid knew what she would say:

_I’ve shown you what I’m giving up, now you’d better keep your promise._

“I will,” she breathed as the cage doors slammed shut. “Even if it kills me.”

Chapter End Notes

Icelandic:
þing - A regular assembly of clans in the Viking period, where matters of law were discussed, also known as a ‘thing’ in english.
Chapter 8: Flight

Chapter Notes

And I'm back! With a special double-update! (Which is definitely not because I screwed up and accidentally posted a chapter out of order :P)
Regular weekly updates for this story will resume until we catch up with the story on FF.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 8: Flight

Part 1: Upstroke

Hiccup was flying. His vision was obscured by thick grey fog, but his wings beat the air with confident, easy strokes. The wind parted over his snout and flowed smoothly over the contours of his body, almost caressing his scales.

Suddenly he burst through the wall of fog into clear air. The sun gleamed off the gently rolling sea far below him. He stilled his wings, soaring on thermals rising from a sharp, mountainous island that jutted from the waves. He felt a fierce surge of joy at the sheer freedom of flight, and let out an exultant roar that echoed back to him of the rocks far below.

Hiccup angled slightly, circling around the peak at the centre of the island. His gaze fell upon a plume of smoke rising from a narrow vent near the summit. It wasn’t an ordinary peak, he realised, it was a fire-mountain; gateway to Surtr’s realm.

The whispering of the wind across his ear-plates seemed to twist into words, resolving into the sibilant voice of the Night Fury. “I offer you the gift of the Night Furies’ dominion” she whispered. Her voice swirled around his head, seemingly coming from everywhere and nowhere at once. “Find me and I shall bequeath this to you.”

Hiccup’s eyes focused on a larger rent in the mountainside, a dull red glow shone from within. He readied himself to dive.

“Hiccup?”

He blinked his eyes open. He was still in the cove. He was still grounded. It had all been a dream, again.

With a groan he pulled himself out from his hollow beneath the roots of the pine. His prison was dimly lit by the dawn sky; it couldn’t have been more than a few hours since he’d closed his eyes to rest. Peering around the cove, he spotted Astrid waiting expectantly a few paces away. Yawning toothlessly he padded over towards her.

‘MORNING ASTRID’ he scrawled. ‘WHY ARE YOU HERE?’

“I flew with Stormfly!” she burst out.

Hiccup blinked several times, part of his mind was still circling around the mountain from his
dream.

‘WHO?’

“The Nadder from the ring. I... Uh...” She looked down at the ground, a hand unconsciously going
to her fringe. “I named her.”

Hiccup stared at her dumbly; he couldn’t have heard that right.

‘YOU FLEW WITH THE NADDER FROM THE RING?’

“Yes,” she replied eagerly. “I persuaded Gobber to let me feed the training dragons, so I could see
Stormfly again. I took the stitches out of her wing, and then she asked me to get on her back, and,
Hiccup, it was amazing...”

Hiccup listened in silent wonderment as Astrid proceeded to wax lyrical about her ride with
Stormfly. He’d never seen her like this before; even when she’d spoken of fighting dragons in
years past, there had been a sense of almost businesslike detachment, not this raw, gushing
enthusiasm.

Her words brought the images from his dream swimming back into his mind. The sensation of the
air filling his wing-sails had filled him with a primal sense of power and freedom unlike anything
he’d experienced before; while he was flying he felt like he could do anything.

Astrid trailed off mid-sentence. “... Hiccup? What are you doing?”

He jerked in surprise; he hadn’t realised he’d unconsciously began to spread his wings.

‘I WANT TO TRY FLYING AGAIN.’ He wrote hurriedly.

“Are you sure?” Astrid asked, concern creeping into her tone.

In lieu of a reply, he spun around and bounded towards his boulder. With a quick scrabbling of
claws, he was on top and turning to face the cove, his wings spread to their fullest extent.

He took in a deep breath and launched himself forwards. The air was forced from his chest a
second later as once more he crashed heavily to earth. He lay there for barely a moment, before he
rolled to his feet and made his way back to the boulder.

Again he launched himself into space, and again nature won the battle of wills.

“Hiccup,” Astrid began, extending a worried hand towards him. “It's okay, you don't have to-”

“No,” Hiccup cut her off with a growl, turning back towards the stone. “This time, this time for
sure.”

With a roar born of equal parts fury and determination, Hiccup threw himself into the air. With all
his might, he drove his wings down, causing him to lurch upwards unevenly. Feeling himself
beginning to skew in the air, he flapped hard again, trying to control his trajectory through sheer
power. However, his balance was already too far off-centre and his motion caused him to flip out
of control, sending him tumbling heavily to the ground.

Something in him snapped, and Hiccup saw red.

Not feeling the pain of his landing, the boy-turned-Night-Fury flipped upright and shot a scorching
fireball at the taunting cliffs around him. As the sound of his shot reverberated around the cove, he
drew in breath and followed it with a bellow of pure rage. Why did the Night Fury bother turning him into a dragon if he was just going to spend the rest of his days in this forsaken pit?!

“Hiccup?”

He spun towards the sound, teeth bared, a low growl rumbling in his throat, he would-

“Hiccup,” Astrid asked, “are you okay?”

Hiccup blinked and sat down heavily on his haunches; he’d been a moment away from leaping and tearing into her with his claws out of sheer frustrated anger.

He realised that he’d been feeling it since his encounter with the Queen; a subtle itch at the back of his mind, a part of him that needed to fly. He stood up and began to pace back and forth across the cove. It wasn’t just the claustrophobia of being stuck in the cove - although that was certainly part of it - the very idea of being confined to the ground, of being subjected to the terrain’s arbitrary changes in elevation was suddenly oppressive to him.

“Hiccup,” Astrid repeated, “You’re scaring me.”

He looked over at her; she had backed up several paces and her hand was poised at her waist, ready to draw her dagger if needed. With an effort of will, Hiccup forced himself to stop pacing and turn to face her.

‘I’M SORRY’ he wrote, then let out an apprehensive sigh. He knew how she would interpret his next words, and feared how she would react. For all you know, her reaction might be entirely justified, a voice within him whispered. With a heavy paw he began to scratch in the dirt.

‘THERE’S SOMETHING IN ME THAT NEEDS TO FLY’

Astrid felt her heart suddenly leap into her throat. All her fears from when she’d first found him in the cove surged back into her mind - what if it was just a matter of time before the boy she’d come to know was completely subsumed by his draconic instincts and replaced with a feral Night Fury?

Dammit, she thought. Why did this have to happen now when she’d learnt so much about him, and through him, the dragons?

She stepped up to him and knelt, placing her hands on either side of his head. “Hiccup,” she breathed. “Don’t give up. it’s still you in there, you can fight this.” She desperately hoped her words were true, but they sounded pitifully hollow even to her ears.

Hiccup crooned appreciatively, she had to fight the urge to flinch away from him at the flash of teeth. She stood up as he raised his paw and began to scratch a message in the dirt.

‘DON’T WORRY’ he wrote. ‘I’LL BE OKAY’. He spread his lips in a draconic approximation of a smile and she forced her lips to return the gesture, although she knew his efforts to reassure her were as empty as her own.

Astrid stared down at him, and opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out; her burning desire to tell someone about her experience with Stormfly had dried up, replaced only with a numbing sense of dread.

The bright trill of a songbird cut through the sudden silence, drawing Astrid’s eyes to the sky. The pale grey of dawn was brightening into the blue of daytime; she needed to get back to Berk before
her absence was noticed.

“Hiccup,” she began awkwardly, turning her gaze back to the Night Fury in front of her. “I’m sorry, but I’ve got to get back to the village before somebody misses me.”

‘GO’ Hiccup wrote. ‘I’LL BE FINE.’

She hesitated. “Hiccup, I...”

He grunted and jerked his head towards the gap in the cliffs.

“Okay,” she took in a breath, “I’ll come back as soon as I can, I promise.”

Astrid took a final look at the boy-turned-Night-Fury then forced herself to keep looking forwards as she passed between the walls of stone and headed for Berk, trying to ignore the muffled scrapes of claws on stone that seemed to follow her.

The knife slipped in Astrid’s hand, slicing outwards through the scales of the fish she was gutting and biting deep into the palm of her opposite hand.

“Ow! Son of a half-troll!”

Balder Hofferson looked up sharply at her cry of pain. “Astrid! Are you okay?”

“I’m fine dad,” she said through gritted teeth, dropping the blade and cradling her injured hand. “The stupid knife slipped, that’s all.”

Her father’s eyes widened in concern and he circled around the long worktable towards her. “Let me see.”

“I’m fine dad.” The cut barely even pained her; she’d taken far worse on fire duty during raids. “There’s no need to-”

“Let me see,” Balder repeated.

Astrid sighed inwardly and held out her hand. Sometimes she wished her father wasn’t such a fine example of Viking persistence.

Balder gripped her left wrist and turned her palm upwards. She tried not to wince at the stark red line across her hand and the crimson dripping down her forearm and staining her wraps.

“What’s the matter?” he asked softly. “It’s been years since you last cut yourself with the fish knife.”

It was true; almost as soon as she could be trusted to not take someone’s eye out with the knife, she’d been put to work helping to process the fish brought back on the Sjóknapa.

“Nothing,” she lied.

Balder’s eyes narrowed fractionally. “We both know that’s not true.” He paused, then continued in a softer tone, “Your mother told me you’ve been ...distant for the last few days, what’s wrong?”

Astrid sighed noisily. “I’ve just had a lot on my mind recently.” Her brief encounter with Hiccup had been lurking in her thoughts all day, and she’d barely paid any attention to her hands as they made the repetitive moves of gutting the fish for storage.
A sharp rip caught her attention, and she looked up as her father ripped a length of cloth from the sleeve of his tunic and roughly bound her hand. “There,” he said, tying off the makeshift bandage. “Now you’d better go see Gothi, you don’t want that getting infected.”

Astrid grumbled under her breath, but dutifully left the warehouse and began the long trek up the ramps towards the elder’s house; she’d been a warrior-in-training long enough to know to always treat injuries seriously, no matter how embarrassing their cause.

Half an hour later, she stood on the cliffs overlooking the docks, her hand washed and freshly bandaged.

She let out a long breath and sat down, legs hanging over the edge, watching as the sun crept towards the horizon. The elder had forbidden her from putting any strain on her hand for the rest of the day, so she couldn’t return to her family, and she couldn’t go walking in the forest as she normally would either, as she knew that her feet would inevitably carry her to Hiccup’s cove, and she wasn’t ready to deal with him again.

Her gaze drifted along Berk’s coastline until she spied the distant headland that held the dragon arena. Perhaps spending some time with the other dragon under her care would take her mind off Hiccup for a bit. She knew that she’d fed the dragons just the day before, but there were buckets of fish scraps accumulating on the docks that would otherwise end up chumming the waters of the harbour.

Her mind made up, she got to her feet and wound her way down the ramps towards the docks. Sól’s chariot was kissing the crests of the waves far below by the time she reached the promontory and set down her basket of fish scraps - careful to take the weight with her uninjured right hand.

She cranked open the arena gate and quickly made her rounds of the cages, shovelling a portion of fish guts through each door, and finishing in front of Stormfly’s alcove. This time, she didn’t hesitate in opening her cage. The Nadder squawked in surprise, but midway through it morphed into a soft coo of recognition.

Astrid raised her hand as the Nadder stepped out of the cage, and Stormfly bent her neck, pressing her muzzle into her palm, purring softly.

“Hey girl,” Astrid greeted warmly.

Stormfly purred louder. Suddenly, she pulled away and began sniffing at her other hand.

“Stormfly, what’s-”

The Nadder crooned softly and gently nosed her left hand; her bandaged hand.

“Oh...” She was forcibly struck by the vast gap between the Viking idea of dragons, and the creature looking up at her with concerned eyes. “We really don’t know anything about you guys, do we?” She breathed.

Stormfly chirped and tilted her head questioningly.

“It’s nothing,” she replied. “I was being careless and I cut myself, I’ll be fine.”

The dragon cooed again, then snaked her tongue out of her mouth and ran it over her palm.

Astrid opened her mouth to complain, then stopped as she felt the stinging pain of her wound
suddenly fade. “That actually feels better, thanks.”

The Nadder chirped happily, and Astrid raised her other hand to stroke the side of her jaw appreciatively.

“Come on,” she said, picking up the remaining scraps and heading for the gate. Stormfly followed along behind her, her claws clicking on the stone.

Astrid dropped the basket on the cliff outside the ring - where they had taken off from the day before - and flipped off the lid. “There you go.”

Stormfly immediately stuck her head inside and in a few seconds slurped up her meal.

“Hey girl,” she called as the Nadder raised her head, licking the last drops of blood and juices from her neck. “I got you something.” She reached into the bag she’d tied to the Basket’s straps and pulled out three small fish she’d filched from the Sjóknapa’s nets. She felt a brief flicker of guilt, but it vanished as soon as Stormfly’s nostrils widened and she let out an excited trill.

Astrid held up one of the fish, and Stormfly crouched, her hips wiggling in excitement. Astrid felt a smile tug at the corners of her lips as she tossed the fish to the Nadder one by one, chuckling to herself as Stormfly snatched them out of the air.

As the last fish vanished down the dragon’s gullet, she turned away with a soft sigh and sat down on the cliff edge, staring out across the dark ocean.

She stiffened reflexively at the sound of movement behind her, then nearly fell forwards in shock as Stormfly curled around her, her head resting on the ground on her right, and her tail hanging over the cliff to her left. She gently leaned back against the Nadder’s flank, and rested a hand on the back of her neck, slowly caressing the scales beneath her fingers.

Inevitably, her thoughts turned to Hiccup’s predicament. Gobber always said that ‘A downed dragon is a dead dragon’ and she’d assumed he meant that a flightless dragon couldn’t escape from a Viking warrior; perhaps there was more to it than that? She thought again of Hiccup’s cove, while it was as picturesque a place as any on Berk, she knew she’d be going stir-crazy if she’d been stuck in it for almost a week.

She sighed in frustration; Hiccup needed to get out of the cove, she already knew that. However, the rock walls were too soft to allow a creature of his size to climb out, and it was obvious that he wasn’t going to learn to fly by himself.

“What am I going to do, Stormfly?” she whispered.

Astrid was nearly knocked off the cliff as Stormfly suddenly surged to her feet. A moment later she recovered and scrambled into a ready crouch, hand on her knife. “What is it, Stormfly?” She asked in an urgent whisper, glancing up at the dragon stood over her; The Nadder’s wings were half-opened in alarm, and her gaze was fixed on a point on the horizon.

She followed Stormfly’s stare. Against the last, dying lights of the day she could make out several dark silhouettes moving over the ocean. Her heart froze in her chest. It couldn’t be, not so soon...

“Stormfly,” she began breathlessly, “Are those-”

The raid horn rang out from the village.

Astrid swore, cursing herself for leaving her armour and weapons back in the village. She stepped
out from under Stormfly and turned to face the dragon. “Stormfly, you need to- AHHH!” She cried out in shock as Stormfly suddenly loomed over her and gripped the scruff of her tunic in her jaws. Her limbs swung uselessly as she was swiftly lifted into the air, and deposited on the Dragon’s back.

She barely had time to register her contact with the scales before Stormfly lurched forwards over the cliff edge.

Stormfly shot upwards and turned sharply - banking so hard her wings were momentarily perpendicular to the ocean - all in the space of a few terrifying heartbeats. Even after they leveled out, her wings kept up the same frantic pace. Astrid suddenly realised she had been holding back on their first flight.

“Stormfly!” She yelled over the rushing wind.

If the Nadder heard her, she didn’t show it.

She freed one of her hands from its death-grip on the dragon’s neck and pounded on her flank. “What are you doing!? I need to get back there!”

Stormfly growled harshly and tossed her head, only narrowly avoiding goring Astrid with her horns.

Astrid got the message and subsided, crouching low against Stormfly’s back as the battle cries of men and dragons rang out behind them.

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**Part 2: Downstroke**

Hiccup awoke with a start. After several failed attempts to get off the ground, he’d forced himself into his hiding space beneath the tree, and had managed to sleep fitfully. Every time he drifted off, his wings would twitch and he’d jerk awake, filled with an aching need to fly.

His hackles rose, and a subconscious growl rumbled in his throat as some primitive instinct buried in the back of his mind told him he wasn’t alone. Biting down on his growl he crawled out into the cove and glanced around with a mounting sense of trepidation.

Moments later, his head-frills twitched as an all-too-familiar chattering reached his ears. His gaze was drawn upwards to see a multitude of draconic shadows flitting across the star-studded sky.

*Another raid?* he thought disbelievingly; this would be the third attack in the space of a week.

Hiccup was rooted to the spot, and could only look on in stunned silence as a shadow detached itself from the flock and descended towards him, resolving into the formidable outline of a blood-red Nightmare before it touched down less than a body-length away.

*“We meet again, Night Fury.”*

His frills twitched again, and with a chill he recognised the otherworldly edge of the Queen’s voice. He shrunk backwards, unconsciously baring his teeth. *”W-what do you want?”* he hissed.

“I wish to apologize,” she began. ”I should not have treated you like an unruly member of the flock in our last meeting; we are, after all, equals.”

”*Equals?”* Hiccup queried before he could stop himself.
The Nightmare sat back on its haunches and peered down its long snout at him. Hiccup was suddenly reminded that Night Furies were not a particularly large species of dragon.

"Of course," The Queen replied. "We are both Alphas."

"I'm nothing like you!" Hiccup hissed back.

"Oh?" The Queen asked calmly. "And what do you actually know of me?"

"I know that the flock you claim to protect are actually your slaves!"

"Is that so?" The Queen questioned. "Are your former people not known across the world for raiding other tribes and taking whatever - or whomever - they want?"

"I.." Hiccup spluttered.

"The similarities between us as individuals are irrelevant," The Queen replied. "The truth is in your blood, child of Yilbegän; you are an Alpha."

Hiccup cringed instinctively at her growled emphasis, but he forced himself to hold his ground, telling himself that he wasn’t defenceless anymore; he had his fire. "What do you want from me?"

"We are in a situation where we can mutually benefit each other," The Queen purred. "You are trapped in this cove, flightless and alone, surrounded by the sworn enemies of our kind, and my flock could benefit greatly from your skills."

"Why bother asking," He snarled, "when you're just going to enslave me however I answer?"

"I realise you have no reason to trust me," She crooned in a gentle tone, "But I give you my word as an Alpha that using my power on you would not be in my best interest. You are much more valuable to me as a willing, independant agent."

A series of memories swam through Hiccup’s mind: every time one of his inventions had failed and his peers had sneered at him, calling him "useless"; every time his father had looked at him with a sense of crushing disappointment. Here was someone - a leader, no less - that valued him for who he was.

Hiccup blinked, and found himself staring into the Nightmare’s flame-yellow eyes. With a start, he realised the Queen was waiting for him to respond. "No," he growled. "I won’t help you destroy my village."

"Even if they never appreciated me," he added silently.

"Of course," The Queen replied smoothly - as if she’d expected his reply. "I am willing to spare this settlement from our hunting parties for however long it takes you to adapt to your new life."

Hiccup opened his jaws to refuse her again, but no words came out.

He could buy Berk a reprieve from the raids.

He’d seen Stoick late at night, when no one else was around, and knew how dire the village’s situation really was; surely the mere chance that the Queen’s offer was sincere - even if it was only temporary - was worth his life?

For once in your life Hiccup, think of yourself, his thoughts whispered.
The long nights of the last week, confined in the cove with only the company of his hunger and loneliness weighed heavily on his mind; it was a miracle he’d survived this long by himself. If he accepted, he’d finally be able to escape this pit, and take his rightful place alongside a people and a leader who respected him.

You know it’s what you want.

Unbidden, an image flared before his mental eye: himself and Astrid in the cove two days ago, sharing the experiences of their childhoods for the first time.

He hadn’t been alone.

A moment too late, Hiccup realised the voice whispering in his thoughts hadn’t been his own; it had been the Queen’s.

You are mine now, Hiccup.

No! He tried to open his jaws and use his fire, but his body wouldn’t move.

Somehow, he knew that the Nightmare had ignited itself, but all he could see was the glowing yellow eyes of the Nightmare, and through them, the interior of a mountain, lit by a lake of glowing lava - his nest.

He remembered there being pain last time; he thought that he could almost feel it, but it was distant. Anyway, why was he straining to feel pain? It was so much easier to drift away...

Stormfly beat her wings desperately, the tops of the trees speeding past mere inches beneath her claws. She could feel the human female’s forlegs clenched tightly around her neck, and just make out her small whimpers of fear over the rushing of the wind in her ears.

She felt a pang of sorrow, but she didn’t slow her wings, instead she willed them to beat even faster. She prayed that the human would understand that she was too important to be risked fighting the Queen’s flock.

Another formation of dragons flew out of the darkness and she stilled her wings - dropping even closer to the trees - as they passed overhead.

Stormfly knew that she was risking everything on this headlong flight. If she was spotted she’d be under the Queen’s control again before she could react; she was counting on the darkness and the sheer numbers of the flock to keep her from the Queen’s notice.

Regardless, if what she’d understood of the human’s words was true - that the last Night Fury had created another of her kind - then it was worth any cost; even her life and that of the first human in generations to sympathise with her kind.

A bright orange light suddenly flared in the forest below her. Fear lanced through Stormfly’s chest and she willed her burning muscles to carrier towards it even faster.

What if i’m too late? She knew the light was mere wing-beats away, but it never seemed to get any closer. If only she hadn’t been caught, and her flight muscles were in proper condition...

An eternity passed in the space of a single heartbeat before she got her first glimpse of the cove. Sinister shadows flickered on the walls, thrown by the skin of a burning Nightmare. Cowering before the blazing dragon was an ancient, unmistakeable silhouette.
Even over the rapidly-decreasing distance, she could see that the Night Fury was trembling; his head-frills jerking back and forth as he fought the Queen’s will.

*Hold on, Stormfly thought, Just a moment more...*

Stormfly cracked open her jaws, drawing in a lungfull of the rushing air, then let it out in a furious screech.

Her roar had no words. It was a cry of defiance and righteous anger; a promise to all those who had died to keep the old ways alight, that their sacrifice would not be in vain.

With a grunt of effort, Stormfly turned her nose to the sky. As her wings stalled, she whipped her tail downwards, releasing a deadly flurry of spines.

As the Nightmare roared in agony Stormfly folded her wings, and dropped to the ground in front of the Night Fury.

*“Pathetic gnat!”* The Queen hissed. *“Do you think this changes anything? I am an Alpha! I-”* The Nightmare faltered, it’s flames flickering as the venom carried by her spines began to work.

*“Alpha?”* Stormfly spat. *“You are a tyrant, nothing more.”* She raised her head defiantly. *“Yilbegän's judgement is coming for you, spawn of Koyash. An Alpha protects them all.”*

The Queen drew herself up to respond, but at that moment her body gave out, and the Nightmare crashed to the ground, his flames extinguished.

Stormfly stood there for a moment, panting in shock and exertion. She could hardly believe she’d just stood up to the Queen; her dam had taught her that keeping the knowledge of the old ways alive was more important than any act of rebellion. Although all those stories had done nothing when the Queen had forced them away from their hunting grounds, and her dam had starved to death.

Stormfly tossed her head lightly, as if she could simply shake away the old memories. She felt the human female slide off her back and rush towards the Night Fury. However, at that moment the Nightmare’s eyes widened and his sides heaved as he took his first - and last - gasp of free air.

Stormfly stepped forwards and bowed her head, touching her nose to his muzzle. *“Fly swiftly brother,”* she whispered. *“And may Yilbegän’s path stand open for you.”*

The Nightmare’s eyes blearily focused on her, before his eyelids began to droop and he drifted off into his final sleep.

Stormfly sighed softly - she hoped that her words had brought the dragon some small measure of comfort in his final moments.

At the sound of a groan from behind her, Stormfly turned around. The Night Fury was lying sprawled on his side; the human female knelt beside his head, a gentle paw resting on the crown of his skull.

The Night Fury’s eyes flickered open briefly and another wordless sound escaped his jaws.

*“Hiccup!”* the female gasped. Stormfly did a double-take; she’d forgotten that was the name the human had given for the Night Fury. *“He’s going to be okay, isn’t he?”* the female asked, looking up at her.
Stormfly dropped her head to be level with the human’s. “He’ll be fine,” she crooned reassuringly; she knew the human couldn’t understand her words, but hoped her tone would convey the message. She winced inwardly; when she’d been knocked free of the Queen’s influence it had taken her a whole day before she could think coherently again. *I hope it doesn’t take him that long,* she thought with a nervous glance at the sky.

A few minutes later Hiccup’s eyes blinked open again, and his groan resolved into words. “Astrid...?” he slurred, “W-what happened?”

*Astrid?* Was that the human’s name? She’d heard it being shouted when the humans fought outside her prison, but hadn’t realised the significance. “I don’t know, Hiccup,” Astrid told him, “Stormfly...” she trailed off. “I-” the Nadder began, but before she could get more than a single word out, Hiccup cried out in fear and tried to scramble backwards. However, in his disoriented state, he tripped over himself and sprawled on his stomach.

“Hiccup, it’s okay!” Astrid cried, “She’s a friend! Hiccup, this is Stormfly - The Nadder from the ring.” She gestured between the two dragons, “Stormfly, Hiccup.”

Hiccup, shakily clambered to his feet and inclined his head towards her. “Thank you. You saved my life... I think. It’s all kind of fuzzy...”

Stormfly opened her maw to respond then closed it again, remembering a lesson her dam had taught her. Taking a deep breath, she bowed her head and mantled her wings in an ancient draconic gesture of submission and respect. “You are welcome, my Alpha,” She purred, holding the pose for a moment. “The disorientation should pass in a few minutes.”

“Why did you do that?”

Stormfly blinked. “What?”

“You bowed to me and called me ‘Alpha’” he explained. “The Queen called me an Alpha as well.”

“It is what you are,” she replied simply. With an apprehensive upwards glance she added “I’ll explain later. Right now, you should get back in the air; you’re vulnerable as long as you’re on the ground.”

“Don’t I know it,” he muttered to himself. Speaking up, he addressed her; “I can’t. Fly, I mean, I... I used to-”

“You used to be human, I know.” she finished for him. “But you’re a dragon now; so fly.”

“Believe me, I’ve tried,” he shot back morosely. “I assure you: I fly about as well as a rock.”

Stormfly didn’t respond immediately, instead she paced slowly around him, examining him from every angle. From her dam she knew more about Yilbegän’s children and their powers than any other dragon alive - save for the Night Fury herself. Still, this was so far beyond what she knew to be possible, she felt like a hatchling faced with an elder’s riddle.

Eventually, she finished circling and stood before him again. As far as she could tell, he was a full-blooded Night Fury - *Of course,* she thought, *he probably knows what that looks like better than I; after all, he’s had first-hand experience.*
“The Night Furies were the fastest and most agile fliers of all dragonkind,” she told him, repeating one of her Dam’s oldest lectures. “As soon as they could stand, a Night Fury hatchling could take to the air, and by the time they reached adulthood, no dragon could hope to match them; not even the wandering Timberjacks who lived and died on the wing.” She met his gaze. “Your body was made to fly, Hiccup.”

Hiccup looked away. “Telling me what I should be capable of doesn’t change what I am,” he murmured.

An idea suddenly struck Stormfly. “What you are isn’t the problem...” she breathed. “Go run over to those cliffs and back,” she told him, tossing her head in the direction of the cove wall.

He blinked at her. “What?”

“I think I know how to you into the air,” she told him. “Just do it.”

Hiccup hesitated for a moment, then span and bounded towards the cliffs. His gait was almost flawless; if she didn’t know better she would have sworn he’d been born a dragon. A small boulder blocked his path as he began to turn, and without breaking stride he leapt over it and galloped back towards her, his muscles rippling in sinuous, powerful waves.

“Do Humans often run around on four legs?” she asked him as he skidded to a stop before her.

“What?” he replied. “Of course not!”

“Then explain to me why you just ran like you’d been a dragon all your life,” she put to him.

“I- I don’t know,” he stammered, “It just felt right...”

“You didn’t have to think about it,” she explained, “because your legs know to run. Just like your wings; they already know how to fly, you just have to let them.”

“How do I do that?” he queried.

Stormfly cast her gaze around the cove, it landed on a large boulder beside a narrow crack in the cliffs. She gestured towards the stone with her muzzle. “Go climb up there and face me,” she instructed.

Hiccup sighed dejectedly, his head-frills drooping. “I already tried that,” he murmured, “It won’t work.”

Stormfly opened her mouth to respond, but before she could utter a sound, a rising whistle of death cut through the night.

Hiccup’s heart stuttered in his chest and his gaze shot skywards, expecting to see the black silhouette that haunted his dreams diving towards them.

Instead he saw nothing.

A moment later, a flash of blue from the direction of Berk lit up the clouds, and a sound like the rumble of thunder reached them.

“Night Fury...” Astrid whispered, then swore viciously. Hiccup would have been surprised, had he not known she grew up around sailors.
Stormfly fixed him with a piercing golden stare. “We don’t have time for this,” she growled. “I think I can unlock your flying instincts, Hiccup, but I need you trust me.”

“What’s going on, Hiccup?” Astrid asked urgently. “What’s she saying?”

Hiccup turned to face her and quickly scribbled in the dirt.

‘SHE THINKS SHE CAN TEACH ME TO FLY’

“What, now?” Her gaze darted between him and the Nadder, then to the orange glow in the sky. “You’re not safe here anymore. If she really can get you out of here, you need to listen to her.”

“Okay, I’ll trust you,” he told Stormfly. “What do I need to do?”

“You’ve already experimented with flight,” she began, “So I want you to start just by jumping off that rock and trying to fly.”

Hiccup nodded and span away in the direction of his boulder. Despite the circumstances, he felt a tingle of nervous excitement at the prospect of finally getting into the air. Taking a deep breath, he crouched atop the boulder, spread his wings, and leapt. As before, he drove his wings downwards at the apex of his jump, and he jerked upwards. However his course was erratic, and as he raised his wings for a second stroke, he span out of control and crashed into the ground before he could recover.

“See?” Hiccup said, shaking off the clods of mud that clung to his scales. “I told you I can’t fly.”

“Obviously,” Stormfly replied. “However, I also saw that you’re not using your tailfins.”

My what...? Hiccup swung his tail into view. A mirrored pair of black fins unfurled from the tip. He’d almost forgotten they were there; since his first day as a dragon, he hadn’t given much thought to the details of his new form.

“The tailfins are a Night Fury’s most important flight surfaces,” Stormfly explained, standing beside him. “While the wings provide lift, the tailfins give the Fury control. If one is lost or damaged... well, you just demonstrated what happens if you try to fly without two working tailfins. Guard your tailfins with your life; without them you can’t fly. and if you can’t fly you’re as good as dead.” She gently nosed the fins at the base of his tail. “Finally, there are your secondary tailfins, or sub-wings; they provide fine control and stabilise your flight when flapping.”

Hiccup blinked, trying to remember everything she’d said. Before he could open his mouth to ask how she knew all that, she stepped away and gestured towards the boulder again. “Climb up there again and face me, but don’t jump off until I tell you to.”

Hiccup shrugged his wings and scrambled back onto his rock.

“Oh, okay,” Stormfly instructed. “Now, I want you to hold your wings out flat, and open your fins as far as you can.”

He spread his wings, then closed his eyes and focused on moving his fins, after a few moments he was able to do as she said.

“Good, now angle your tailfins upwards slightly and pick a point directly in front of you. Focus on that point, and jump - don’t flap, just glide and concentrate on keeping your fins level.”

Hiccup took a slow breath in, and held it, tensing his body. He opened his eyes and fixed his gaze
on a tiny crack in the cliff wall oppose him. Almost in slow-motion he launched himself forwards.

He tucked his legs tightly against his body as he left the rock behind, his wing membranes tingling as the air flowed over them. A gust of wind rustled through the forest, causing him to wobble. Without even thinking about it, his tail twitched, correcting his course. A fierce surge of joy flared in his chest; yes he was only gliding, but he was doing it - he was flying!

Then the ground came up to meet him, and he forgot everything Stormfly had said. In a panic, he threw out his legs to break his fall and at the same time, tried to flare his wings to slow his descent. Which resulted in him flipping out of control and landing in an ungainly tangle of limbs.

Still, he didn’t care - he’d flown!

He flipped back onto his paws with an exultant whoop. “Did you see that!?" He called to Astrid and Stormfly “I- I did it!”

“Yes, you managed to glide a few body-lengths and then crash-land, truly an achievement worthy of being immortalised in song.” The Nadder’s tone was dry, but he could see the happiness shining in her eyes. “When you’ve recovered,” she continued, “Come back over here and we’ll try flapping.”

Hiccup took a few moments to revel in his success, then crossed the cove and climbed back up to his starting point.

“Aside from the landing, I didn’t see anything wrong with your gliding, so just do what you did before, but this time flap your wings - don’t worry about power; focus on keeping your flaps even.”

Hiccup shuffled his paws impatiently as she spoke - he was done waiting, he wanted to fly!

As soon as she finished he crouched and spread his wings in one motion, then launched himself skywards.

His first flap was uneven, and he wobbled in the air. However, he kept his fins level and he recovered. His second was better. On his third flap, everything clicked - his wings, his tail, the very shape of his body, it all suddenly made sense!

He increased the tempo of his wingbeats, gaining speed. As the cliff wall loomed before him he twisted his tail and banked his wings, turning to follow the edge of the cove.

“Yes Hiccup!” Astrid shouted from below. “That’s it!”

He let out a triumphant bugle as he passed over her head. Oh, this was so much better than his dream. The sense of speed and power was already intoxicating, and he could feel the strength in his wing muscles; he knew he was capable of so much more.

“Shut up and get down here before you draw her attention!”

Oh, right. Chargrined, Hiccup increased the angle of his turn and swooped down towards Astrid and Stormfly.

“Don’t come in too steep!” The Nadder advised him. “And land on your hind legs first!”

He snorted. Of course he was going to land on his hind legs first; it all made sense now. At the last moment of his approach, he backwinged and pulled up sharply, stretching out his legs. However, he misjudged his velocity and his back paws hit the ground harder than he’d expected, causing him
to stagger as he dropped heavily onto his front legs.

“So?” Stormfly asked as he folded his wings. “Still convinced you can’t fly?”

“I...” Words failed him for a moment. “That was... indescribable. My wings... the air, I understand now!” He bowed his head to the Nadder. “Thank you again.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” she replied, “Wait until your wings save your life.” She craned her neck back to gaze at the sky. “Fly as high as you can and glide whenever possible, that should keep you safe from any dragon beside Yilbegän’s daughter.”

It took Hiccup a moment to remember the Queen had called him ‘Yilbegän’s child,’ he wondered who - or what - the name referred to, but now wasn’t the time to ask. “Aren’t you coming with me?” he queried instead.

“You’re safer without me,” she replied. “I would only slow you down in the air, and if the Queen noticed me... I wouldn’t be able to resist her. I will try to conceal myself among the trees instead.” She took a step backwards. “Go now, Hiccup.”

Hiccup nodded to her and spread his wings. He hesitated - he felt like he should say something in parting. “Good luck,” he wished her after a moment’s thought.

Stormfly acknowledged his words with a bob of her head. “Fly safe, my Alpha, and may Ülgen’s light guide you.”

With that, Hiccup took a deep breath, turned his gaze to the stars, and leapt towards them.

Chapter End Notes

Mythology:
Surtr - Norse god of fire and ruler/guardian of Muspelheim, the realm of fire.
Sól - Goddess that drives the chariot of the sun in Norse mythology.
Chapter 9: Pyrrhic

Astrid was buffeted by the wind as Hiccup spread his vast wings and launched into the air. Within a few wingbeats he had cleared the tops of the trees bordering the cove, and a mere handful later his silhouette vanished into blackness of the night.

*If there was any doubt he was a Night Fury, she thought, that proves it.*

“Stay safe, Hiccup” she whispered. A short week ago he had been an ungainly boy in a Night Fury’s body, tripping over himself as he tried to flee. Now he was running and flying like he’d been a Night Fury all his life. She wasn’t sure how she felt about that yet.

Astrid shook her head. Right now, her people were fighting for their very existence; she could sort out her emotions later. She took a step towards the gap in the cliffs and Stormfly looked over at her with a questioning chirp.

“Thank you for helping Hiccup,” she told the Nadder, “But I have to get back to Berk.”

Stormfly let out a squawk of alarm and stepped into her path. The dragon crooned and gently nuzzled at her neck, at the same time enclosing them both in her wings.

Astrid knew what Stormfly was trying to say; *Stay here.*

She took a half-step backwards and placed her hands on either side of the dragon’s muzzle. “I can’t,” she whispered. “I know you care about me, and that’s...” *Impossible. Earth-shattering.* “...Amazing, but I have to go, girl - they’re my family; my friends.”

For a long moment, there was silence, save for the distant clamor of battle.

Eventually, Stormfly whined sadly and dropped her wings. Astrid paused for a moment, her hands lingering on the Nadder’s muzzle.

“I’ll be back, girl” she promised, turning away and scrambling down the gully that lead out of the cove.

Astrid ran headlong through the forest towards Berk, her path barely illuminated by the flames rising from her home. Branches scraped bloody trails along her face and arms, and she swore she should have twisted her ankle when she tripped over an exposed root, but she felt no pain as she kept on running.

She made the journey from Hiccup’s cove in record time, only to skid to a stop at the edge of the trees, struck dumb by what she saw.

Berk was in chaos. Nearly half the village was in flames and, from her vantage point, she couldn’t see anyone working to put them out.

A chill went down her spine as she realised she couldn’t see anyone fighting back at all.

It felt like several minutes before she eventually spotted a small knot of warriors fending off a pack
of Nadders - although it looked more like a desperate fight for survival than an organised counterattack.

“No...” she breathed.

Movement caught her eye. A bloody-haired woman was fleeing down the main road towards her, pursued by a Gronckle. The rock-like dragon spat out a fireball which burst just behind the woman, throwing her off her feet. The Gronckle dropped to the ground, lumbering towards its downed prey.

“No!” she growled, clenching her fists and sprinting downhill towards the village. She would not give up hope; she was a Viking, as long as she drew breath she would believe the battle could be won.

Barely breaking stride, she dropped and pulled a sword out of the muck. Thankfully, its previous owner had fallen face-down so she didn’t see who it was.

The Gronckle’s jaws yawned open, an orange glow blooming in it’s throat. Astrid let out a furious war-cry and the dragon span around, switching its target to her. The moment’s distraction was all she needed. Rushing forwards, she buried her sword in the roof of its mouth. No sooner than she’d driven the blade home, she let go of the blade and dived to the side as molten rock spewed forth from the dying dragon’s maw.

Breathing heavily, she turned to the fallen woman, only to freeze as she recognised the person beneath the blood and soot.

“Ruffnut!? ” she asked, disbelieving.

“Nice of you to join the fun,” her friend wheezed. “Sleep in, did you?”

“You’re welcome, by the way,” she replied, forcing a chuckle despite the pang of guilt in her chest.

She held out her hand and Ruff grasped it, pulling herself to her feet. “Yeah,” she grunted, “Nice save.”

“Where’s Tuff?” Astrid asked, scanning the street.

“Dunno,” the twin replied, picking up her spear from where it had fallen. “Gobber sent the two of us to gather up as many warriors as we could, and send them to the raid horn for a push to retake the main square. Astrid, it’s…”

Ruffnut trailed off, but Astrid knew what she was going to say. If the centre of the village was lost, then things were worse than she thought. This wasn’t a strategic move; it was a final stand.

“Let’s go,” Astrid told her. “You take point.”

Astrid’s gaze drifted to the chaotic skies as they cautiously moved through the streets. She couldn’t abandon her people, but she prayed that Hiccup would have the sense to not get involved.

Hiccup soared through the black sky. He beat his wings, glided for several heartbeats, then flapped again to maintain altitude. However, he had little time to enjoy the freedom of his newfound flight, as his eyes were glued to the unfolding destruction of his home below him.

From a dragon’s-eye view, he had a unique and terrible perspective on the battle for Berk. On the ground, the actions of the raiding dragons had always seemed like the chaotic and random attacks
of wild animals, however from above he could clearly see the sinister intelligence that directed the flock.

The dragons fought in loosely-organised groups, that would all attack the same area; if one of them encountered a defender, the others would converge, forcing the defender to retreat or face multiple dragons at once. When the Berkians rallied for a counterattack, the whole group would take wing together and attack someplace else. The groups of dragons flitted back and forth across the embattled village below him, and not one of them looked up and noticed him; whether that was due to his black scales or to them simply being distracted he didn’t know.

From his viewpoint, he could see the battle was going badly. For the first time he could remember, the dragons outnumbered his former tribesmen and, to make matters worse, their warriors were scattered and disorganised, turning an organised defence into a hundred individual clashes of shield and steel against claw and fire.

Hiccup grimaced and tore his gaze away as a Nadder’s claws laid open a man’s stomach. He wished his Night Fury senses weren’t quite so honed; even from this altitude he could pick out every gruesome detail of the bodies that lay in the streets. He didn’t want to count them, but he could already tell that there were too many.

He twisted his tail and turned towards the outskirts of the village. Below him, a pair of figures picked their way down a side alley between two partially-demolished houses. He easily identified Ruffnut thanks to her distinctive barbed spear, while Astrid had clearly salvaged a single-bladed longaxe.

He followed them from the air as they made their way in a wide arc around the edge of the village, heading towards the raid horn, where a group of warriors was already gathering.

A waft of green mist caught Hiccup’s eye as Astrid and Ruffnut crept around the back of a hay barn. His gaze darted to a pair of serpentine tails trailing out of the building's doors. “Astrid!” He yelled desperately.

Even if somehow she’d heard his roar and understood it, he was too late; in that moment the barn exploded in a near-blinding flash of yellow-white light, throwing Astrid and Ruffnut to the ground.

The next few moments unfolded in horrific slow-motion. The Zippleback leapt out of the cloud of dust and smoke and pounced on Astrid. “No!” He cried in helpless frustration. He was too far away. There was no way he could get down there -

Hiccup didn’t think. He flicked his tail and pulled in his wings, plummeting headfirst towards the ground. The world around him blurred, yet he could pick out every detail of the Zippleback in perfect clarity. His folded wings vibrated as a baleful shriek began to build. He cracked open his jaws. Air rushed down his throat, straight to the source of his fire, stoking the flames far hotter than his lungs ever could.

He fired.

The first thing Astrid knew of the explosion was when she suddenly found herself airborne, flying splinters of wood slicing gashes up and down her arms and legs. The breath was knocked out of her moments later as she hit the ground, then again as a Zippleback leapt from the ruined barn onto her chest.

Her gaze slid past the twin heads looming over her to the smoke-obscured stars far above. Hiccup,
Stormfly, Orvar, she thought, I’m sorry.

Somehow, over the ringing in her ears, she heard a rising whistle.

There was a blinding flash of light and heat. Something heavy landed on her chest.

Several moments passed before she slowly blinked open her eyes.

One of the Zippleback’s heads was lying unmoving on her chest, it’s eyes glassy and unseeing.

With a grunt, she pulled herself out from under the dragon and stood up, looking around at a vision of Muspelheim. The hay barn was completely gone; burning motes of hay floated down around her like sinister snow, painting the scene in a ruddy light. The clash and clamour of battle was muted as if her head was underwater, granting a sense of twisted serenity to her surroundings.

She turned around slowly. At the centre of the alleyway lay the body of the Zippleback, a bloody crater carved out of it’s spine. She immediately turned her eyes to the sky, but saw no sign of the black dragon that had saved her life.

I guess that makes us even now, Hiccup, she thought.

Something landed on her shoulder, and she whirled around, fists at the ready, only to freeze halfway when she recognised Ruffnut.

The blond twin recoiled a step, her mouth moving up and down, but no sound reached Astrid’s ears.

Astrid shook her head, gesturing to her ears; Ruffnut nodded and held out her salvaged axe. Astrid took it in both hands and gestured for Ruff to follow her.

As the adrenaline began to fade from her system, the numerous cuts and scrapes she’d received in the explosion made themselves known. She grimaced, but pushed onwards through the pain; she knew she was lucky to have escaped the blast with only minor injuries.

Her hearing gradually returned, and a few minutes later she froze in dread at the sound of a rising note that struck terror into the hearts of fearless Norsemen. Moments later, a blue bolt streaked from the clouds and struck the roof of one of the few intact buildings, rendering its first storey into so much matchwood.

She heard Ruffnut urging her to keep moving, however, she remained rooted to the spot, remembering with a chill that Hiccup wasn’t the only Night Fury in the skies over Berk.

Hiccup’s wings strained and the flight muscles in his chest burned as he sought to regain the altitude he’d lost in his dive. However, he was too numb with shock to feel the pain.

He’d killed the Zippleback, he had no doubt about that. He told himself that it had been about to kill Astrid, that he’d had no choice but, the knowledge that it had been another innocent victim of the Queen - just like the Nadder in the cove - weighed heavily on his mind. It unsettled him just how easy it had been; all it took was a thought and a shift of his tail, then gravity did the rest.

Worse, there was a small part of him that derived a dark, savage thrill from unleashing the power of the demon that haunted Berk’s skies.

Below him, Astrid and Ruffnut picked themselves up out of the wreckage and continued down the alley, away from the remains of the barn.
His ear-fins perked, picking out a peculiar note from the cacophony of rushing wings. The sound grew in volume, and the Vikings on the ground reacted to it, throwing themselves to the ground or cowering behind shields.

A flash of recognition shot through Hiccup, followed by an icy surge of terror. He wobbled in the air as he swept his head from side to side, expecting to see the offspring of Lightning and Death itself screaming out of the dark towards him any moment.

A flicker of movement caught his eye, and his head snapped around to follow a black-on-black shape plunging out of the clouds. It unleashed its brilliant bolt of destruction, and for an instant the Night Fury was silhouetted - wings outstretched - against a flash of blue light. The next moment, she sped away into the night.

Hiccup took several deep breaths, realising he hadn’t been the Night Fury’s target.

On the ground, Astrid and Ruffnut joined with the group of warriors massing around the raid horn - he spotted Tuffnut and the rest of the fire crew among them.

He tried to turn away from the village and head for safer skies, telling himself that he couldn’t do any more to help and that the longer he remained over Berk, the more he was at risk of being spotted by the Night Fury. However, the battle below drew his gaze like a gruesome lodestone, and he couldn’t look away.

All too soon, that familiar, terrible whistle rang out once more and Hiccup watched in numb horror as an incandescent blue streak fell from the clouds, blasting a smoking crater into the ground.

Morbid curiosity drew his gaze to the impact site, where it suddenly became real curiosity: The blast had hit in the middle of the street, away from any intact buildings. His first thought was that impossibly, the Night Fury had missed.

It was only when he saw the blackened bodies thrown against the half-burnt wall of a nearby house that he realised what her target had been.

A chill ran down his spine; from time to time an unlucky person would get caught in the Night Fury’s blasts, but she’d never directly targeted their warriors before. He swept his gaze over the burning village. With his father’s nest hunt and the losses they’d already taken, Berk was critically short of defenders; they couldn’t afford to let the Night Fury take out whole groups of men.

Hiccup beat his wings harder, rising up until he was skimming the bottom of the clouds. Gliding once more, he took a deep breath and began to scan the village below him.

Images of a night much like this one, searching for a black shape amongst the stars, swam through his mind. The last time he’d tried to bring down the Night Fury, it had cost him his humanity and very nearly his life; regardless, he had to try.

There! A flicker of movement on the edge of his vision. Hiccup put his faith in his newfound instincts and dove. He could see the Night Fury’s target; a group men half-carrying, half-dragging an injured comrade towards the mead hall. He was coming in from above at a steeper angle, the Night Fury should have to -

A black streak passed beneath him. He adjusted his trajectory and fired. A blast of azure fire shot towards the Night Fury.

At the last moment, she screeched in surprise and rolled to the side, avoiding his shot by mere inches. He was so shocked by her sudden change in course that he froze for a moment, giving the
Night Fury enough time to recover and throw open her wings.

By the time Hiccup could react and halt his own descent, she was already above and behind him. His shoulders strained as the air tugged at his wings, but he pushed back against it regardless, trying desperately to regain altitude - he didn’t need a dragon’s instincts to know that below an angry Night Fury was a bad place to be.

He heard a telltale rushing of air above him and pulled in his right wing, throwing himself into a roll. He felt the heat of the fire blast on his scales as it passed, and was buffeted by the explosion a moment later.

No sooner had he righted himself, a blazing Nightmare leapt into his flight-path and he had to roll in the other direction to avoid it.

I need to get away from the ground, he thought desperately.

Ahead of him, one of the night vision torches had collapsed, setting fire to a row of houses. Hiccup angled towards the blaze, throwing in a couple of zig-zags in the hope of throwing off the Night Fury’s aim.

The air over the fire was uncomfortably hot to his wing-membranes, and the smoke stung his eyes and throat, but he forced himself to turn sharply and remain above the fire. The thick black column of smoke would hide him from the Night Fury, but more importantly it was rising.

For the next few moments, Hiccup’s world was consumed by hot, suffocating heat and choking, smoke-filled air. His lungs burned and his eyes watered as he climbed upwards in a tight spiral. Eventually, he could stand it no longer, and he set his nose level, bursting out of the smoke into glorious, clear air.

He barely had time to suck in a breath of fresh air, before he had to throw himself into a roll to avoid another fire blast screaming towards him.

Craning his neck to the side, he tried to catch a glimpse of the Night Fury, but turning his head disrupted the airflow over his body and slowed him down, limiting him to momentary glances.

Another bolt flew past him, close enough that he could smell the metallic odour left in its wake, forcing him to focus on what was in front of him.

“Make no mistake, Night Fury!” The Queen bellowed from his pursuer’s throat. “If you continue to attack my flock, I will destroy you!”

Hiccup’s head-frills twitched in time with her words, but he didn’t reply, focusing on keeping himself flying, despite the steadily growing burn in his flight muscles. Ahead of him, orange firelight reflected off the black ocean in Berk’s harbour. He closed his eyes.

“Give up this pointless flight now, and I’ll spare your precious human settlement!”

His head frills moved again, and his eyes opened. “Never!” he roared, putting on a burst of speed, and turning upwards into a tight half-loop. He came out of the maneuver just above the source of the Queen’s voice; the Night Fury.

He folded his wings and completed the loop in a whistling dive, launching a blast of his own towards the black dragoness. The Night Fury avoided his blast, but Hiccup followed his shot down regardless.
At the last moment he adjusted the angle of his dive to take him over the cliff edge towards the harbour; if he couldn’t down the Night Fury, he could at least try and draw her away from Berk long enough for the defenders to rally.

A murmur of fear passed through the warriors gathered around the raid horn, as monstrous shrieks sliced through the air above Berk.

“What’s it doing?” Astrid heard one of them ask.

“Probably summoning more of it’s kind,” someone replied.

“No, it’s Thor,” another said, “He’s-”

His voice was cut off by another roar - she thought this one had a slightly different timbre - followed by a flash of blue light and a thunderous peal.

Astrid looked up at the sky in silent anxiety like the others, but for an entirely different reason. The specter of the Night Fury didn’t hold the same sense of unknowable fear it used to for her, instead she knew that Hiccup was up there, doing battle with the black dragon, despite learning to fly barely an hour ago.

“Listen up, ye bunch o’ sissies!” Gobber yelled, clambering onto the stone platform where the great bronze horn was mounted. “So the sky’s making a lot o’ noise; are we wimpy southerners cowed by a thunderstorm, or are we Vikings?”

The smith’s words fooled no-one. Above the smoke, the air was dry; and no storm roared like a dragon. However, his rejection of the facts in front of him in the name of bravado spoke to the Viking spirit, and drew a few hoarse shouts of agreement from the crowd.

“This is it.” Gobber declared. “The children and the elderly are barricaded in the mead hall. We’re going to push across the main square and make our stand on the steps. We’ll hold the beasts there, or we’ll give the skalds a reason to remember our names. Now, ready yourselves!”

With that, the smith dropped down from the podium and slowly made his way to the front of the crowd as they formed up into several loose ranks.

Astrid found herself standing in the second line. On one side of her was her father. He grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her to him, pressing his lips to her forehead. “My daughter,” he murmured against her skin, “I love you.” He pulled away a moment later, and Astrid turned to her other side.

“What?” Ruffnut said, “You expecting me to kiss you as well?”

“Ruff,” she choked out, past the lump in her throat. “If...”

“I know,” the twin replied, meeting her gaze. “I’ll see you again in Valhalla.”

They shared a brief nod, and both turned to face forwards, readying their weapons.

Astrid took a deep breath as she hefted her borrowed axe, forcing thoughts of her friends and loved ones from her mind. This is what I trained for, she told herself, I’m not afraid of death.

“For your families!” Gobber yelled. “Charge!”

With a bellow, the assembled Vikings raised their weapons in the air and pelted across the cobbled
space. The few dragons prowling around the square took flight at the sight of a mass of charging warriors, who made it to the steps without incident.

“Form up!” Gobber barked; despite his peg leg, he’d still managed to keep pace with the last rank. “Get ready!”

The group hastily scrambled into a rough semicircle at the base of the stairs, weapons facing outwards. The village had gone strangely quiet. The sounds of battle ebbed for the moment, but Astrid could see monstrous shapes gathering in the shadows on the edge of the square. The tension in the air was palpable; in a moment the stillness would snap and be replaced with furious action.

A hoarse voice rang out from behind her. “What are you waiting for, you overgrown lizards?! Bring it on!”

The shout was taken up by the gathered warriors, and soon the square rang with overlapping, taunting battle cries. Astrid joined in, releasing the fear and anger that roiled within her in a single, wordless cry.

For a moment, there was absolute silence.

Then, with a roar and a burst of flame, the flock responded.

The last Night Fury dove towards the black waters of Berk’s harbor, chasing a swift-moving dark speck. The speck opened his wings at the last instant, and for a moment his path was traced out by a V of white water.

She tried to pin her wings to her side, and let gravity carry her to oblivion, but the Queen was in total control, and her wings snapped open just before she hit the waves. A second cloud of spray was thrown up in her wake as she pursued the dark blur ahead of her.

The Night Fury wished she could somehow detach herself from her body, so she wouldn’t have to watch what would inevitably happen to the black dragon she was slowly gaining on. She couldn’t help wondering where he - some half-forgotten instinct told her he was male - had been all these years; It had been so long since she’d last hunted one of her kind, she’d thought she was the last. And why did he choose now - over an embattled human village - to appear? Surely the humans hadn’t managed to capture him?

The Night Fury ahead of her turned sharply, and she banked to follow him - her wingtip nearly clipping the waves below her. Ahead, she could see he was making for a dense cluster of sea-stacks that rose out of the ocean.

Her jaws opened, sending air to the fire-source in her chest. She cringed inwardly, awaiting the dreadful screams of a burned, half-dead dragon falling helplessly from the sky, which had been etched into her memories countless times.

A moment later, a blazing bolt of blue fire left her maw. Every time, she told herself not to care, but she couldn’t stop the surge of hope she felt when the shot sailed past him, and struck the base of one of the stacks, sending it crashing into the ocean in a cascade of boulders.

The Night Fury ahead of her panicked, and came to a near standstill in mid air. She was nearly on top of him by the time he recovered and dove through the gap between two adjoining stacks.

He led her on a breakneck chase through the maze of stone pillars. She banked left, then rolled right, then beat her wings to maintain speed. Then, the briefest moment of respite, before she
turned again to avoid the next column of stone.

In a moment of detachment, she found herself studying the other Night Fury as he darted between the stacks, just barely staying ahead of her. As the seconds passed, measured in frantic turn after frantic turn, something began to niggle at the back of her mind. For the most part he flew with the natural grace that had made her species the feared and respected arbiters of dragonkind; however, every so often, there was a moment of almost hesitation when he became unstable and ungainly in the air, like a hatchling unfamiliar with his wings.

Her thoughts were dragged back into the moment as she rolled to avoid yet another rocky pillar and fired two shots in quick succession, collapsing a pair of stacks in front of her prey.

Hiccup’s heart pounded in his chest as he desperately wove between the unyielding towers of stone. It felt like a lifetime ago that he’d been gliding stealthily over his home, watching the battle unfold, and he’d been flying at nearly top speed ever since.

Another column of rock loomed before him, and he barely managed to roll fast enough to avoid smashing his wing on the stone. As soon as the Night Fury dodged his first shot, he’d known he had no chance of out-flying her in open air, so in a last-ditch effort to stay ahead of her he’d flown into the stacks. The craggy pillars had rushed at him so fast that several times he had to rely solely on his new, untested instincts to avoid a bone-shattering collision.

His sensitive ears picked up the soft gasp as the Night Fury drew in air. Before he could react, two stacks in front of him exploded in flashes of azure light, blocking his path with a wall of falling rocks. He cast his gaze from side to side, but he had nowhere else to go. He angled his tail and pitched upwards carrying him over the jumble of fallen rocks.

He barely had time to realise that he was exposed before he heard another shot screaming through the air towards him. He pulled in his wings and rolled to avoid it.

A wall of force hit him, driving the air from his lungs and sending him into an uncontrolled spin. It took him a moment to realise that rather than streaking past him like the ones before, the fireball had detonated in mid air.

As he struggled to right himself, Hiccup caught a glimpse of a black shape climbing almost vertically upwards. By the time he managed to wrest back control of his flight, the Night Fury was nowhere to be seen. He immediately angled away from the black waves and sought to regain altitude, but it was in vain.

That all-too-familiar rising note met his ears, and a great weight hit him from above. He felt the Night Fury’s legs wrap around him and he thrashed in her grip, but her limbs were like iron. Together they plummeted towards the ocean.

“Fool!” The Queen snarled into his ear. “You throw away the power of an Alpha to protect a human village that would sooner see you dead!”

Hiccup could make out the crests of individual waves, picked out in reflected firelight. He felt the Queen’s grip on him shift. “Time to die, Hiccup.”

Blinding pain shot through him and he let out an agonised cry as the Night Fury bit down on his wing-shoulder, teeth easily punching through his scales and puncturing the flight muscle beneath. For an instant he was in free-fall.
Then everything went as back as the ocean he hit.

Astrid fought. A Nadder lunged at her, and she tried to dodge, but her foot slipped in a pool of blood - she didn’t know if it was dragon or human - sending her sprawling on the cobbles. The dragon loomed over her, preparing to strike. She threw her arms out in front of her.

The Nadder’s jaws snapped shut on the haft of her axe, inches away from her face. With a grunt, she wrenched the beast’s head to one side, then let go of her weapon and rolled in the other direction.

She came up beside the dragon’s head, dagger in hand, and without thinking drove the blade into the soft spot in its neck scales. Blood spurted out around the knife, and she tried not to think of how the same spot had felt under her gentle caress a few hours earlier.

“Astrid!” She turned around to see Ruffnut shove her way through the line towards her. “Are you okay?”

Astrid looked away as she pulled her knife out of the Nadder’s neck, the dragon crumpling to the ground. “I’m fi-”

A deep roar shook the ground around her, and at the same time Ruffnut yelled “Look out!”

She dropped, wrestling her axe out of the Nadder’s mouth. As she turned, she saw a Nightmare reared up on it back legs, wings spread. Flames began to flicker around its jaws. With a hoarse cry she drove forwards and upwards, swinging into the dragon’s chest with a two-handed, overhead blow. She heard a grizzly graunch, and felt a shock run up her arms as the axe struck the creature’s breastbone.

She pulled her weapon free and backpedalled, and as the Dragon fell forwards, Ruffnut finished off with a spear thrust through the eye.

Astrid swept her gaze from side to side as more dragons emerged from the smoke and darkness. Ahead, a pair of gronckles prowled towards them, and to her right, several Terrors turned bloodstained muzzles in their direction.

She rested her hand on Ruffnut’s shoulder. “Back to the line!”, she shouted over the din.

Together, they retreated to the relative safety of the Mead Hall’s steps, and two warriors who had been resting behind the line stepped up to take their places. Somebody pressed a skin into her hands, and she drunk gratefully of the warm, stale water within.

Astrid looked around as she panted for breath. Several other warriors were slouched on the stairs nearby, watching the battle with haunted expressions, as their chests rose and fell with their breathing. She tried not to let her gaze linger on the motionless bodies lying on the steps behind them.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, she knew that they couldn’t last, even resting some of their fighters as they were; she could see that there were less warriors in reserve than the last time she rested.

All too soon, one of their warriors staggered backwards exhausted, and she stepped up, taking his place in the line.

The battle became a blur for her; she knew that she killed dragons and received several minor
injuries, but she lost count of both. All she knew was that she hurt and that there was always another dragon to take the place of the ones she slew.

She fought, she bled and she killed, her axe steadily growing heavier in her hands, until, at last she stumbled, and somebody dragged her back behind the line. For several minutes, she lay there on the flagstones, her heart pounding in her ears, and her chest heaving. Then another warrior fell, and she dragged herself to her feet and took his place in the line.

Again, she fought until she could barely stand, and again she staggered back for a few precious moments of rest, before wearily taking up her axe again.

As she pulled her axe from the body of a fallen Nadder, the note that signaled Berk’s doom rang out, and a building on the edge of the square exploded in a flash of blue light and a flurry of splinters.

*It can’t be...* she thought.

“To the forest!” A terrified voice cried. “Save yourselves!”

“No!” Gobber bellowed hoarsely. “Hold the line! Protect your families!”

She stared up at the sky, paralyzed by the creeping realisation that Hiccup was likely dead, and Berk would soon follow. There was a roar of flame and a blazing projectile arced overhead, smashing into the flank of an airborne Nightmare. In its wake, several more projectiles - both incendiary and stone - followed, raining down on the Dragons. Snarls of pain and roars of agony rang out as the deadly hail smashed skulls and shattered wings.

Astrid looked towards their catapult towers - had someone managed to break away and retake them?

No, those towers had been destroyed in the last raid. Anyway, the shots hadn’t come from that direction, they’d come from the direction of -

*The Harbour!*

Her gaze darted across the body- and rubble-strewn square to the ramps leading to the docks; those catapult shots had to have come from a ship. A Nadder charged past her, and Astrid saw her opening. A flare of hope revitalised her and, disregarding the protests of her companions and abused muscles, she put her head down and sprinted for the ramps.

A pack of Terrors tried to stop her, but she bullied through them, ignoring the pricks of their needle-sharp claws. Seconds later, she skidded to a stop at the edge of the plaza, on the cliffs overlooking the harbour.

Lit up like a beacon by a multitude of lamps and hand-held torches, a single longship was moored side-on to the end of the longest pier. The ship’s square sail was emblazoned with a familiar image of a crimson dragon impaled on a pair of crossed swords. Even from a distance, there was no mistaking the copper-haired giant of a man who leapt down onto the docks, warhammer in hand.

“It’s Stoick!” Astrid cried, feeling tears streaming down her cheeks. “He’s back!”

A weary cheer went up from the haggard semicircle of defenders, and moments later an answering bellow echoed up from the docks as warriors began to stream off the packed deck. Stoick raised his hammer and, with their Chief at their head, the returning warband pounded up the ramps towards their homes.
Astrid wanted to fall to her knees in relief, but she knew the battle wasn’t over yet, so she pushed aside her fatigue, raised her axe and joined the returning warriors in their charge back across the square.

She found herself alongside the Chief as they reached the steps of the Great Hall. Without a word, his warriors spread out along the line, relieving the shattered defenders, while the Chief pushed through the crowd, aiming for one figure in particular.

“Odin’s Beard! Yer’ a sight for sore eyes!” Gobber exclaimed, clasping hands with his childhood friend.

“Glad I made it in time,” Stoick replied. “How is it?”

The smith’s face darkened. “It’s bad. I got everyone I could into the hall, and we’ve been holding here ever since, but...”

“You did the best you could,” the Chief replied, resting a hand on his shoulder. “Now, let’s make them pay.”

Gobber raised his axe-hand in a threatening gesture. “Yes, let’s!”

Astrid took two more turns in the defensive line that night but, from the moment Stoick returned, it was clear that the tide of battle had turned in the Berkians’ favour. With the addition of the reinforcements from Stoick’s ship, they were able to shore up their line and, with more men at their disposal, they were able to more effectively rest their fighters.

The dragons seemed to realise this, and their attacks on the beleaguered line turned from a continuous assault into a series of waves. Gradually the assaults grew less and less frequent, until, as the first tendrils of dawn began to tint the sky, a great cry went up from the flock. As one, the remaining dragons took flight, winging their way northwest towards the hidden nest.

A few hoarse victory cries followed after them, but most of the warriors around Astrid simply let out a sigh of relief. She heard several metallic clangs as some of them dropped their weapons and fell to the ground at their feet out of sheer exhaustion.

She managed to stumble, a few paces away, to the first of the steps that led up to the mead hall before she let her axe slip from her fingers and half-slumped, half-sat on the stairs. She stared out at the slowly brightening sky, between the pillars of smoke, in an exhausted haze. There were less fires than she remembered; she supposed that with no one to fight them, the flames must have simply burnt themselves out.

Her gaze drifted downwards to the blood-stained cobbles of the square. The bodies of dragons were thick on the ground; in places they’d been pulled together into makeshift barricades. And a very human leg hung out from one of the gruesome palisades.

Her stomach turned, and she hunched forwards, spilling bitter bile onto the ground before her.

Sometime later, her father came and sat beside her, and she found herself sobbing softly into his shoulder. She’d been a member of the fire crew since she was thirteen; she’d seen the raids and death before, but those skirmishes hadn’t prepared her for this war- no, this butchery - that had unfolded in the square before her. Ever since she could hold an axe, she had trained to fight and kill dragons and, before she’d met Stormfly, she had joined the village in praising the warriors who managed a particularly impressive or skillful kill. But there was no time for skill or celebration when the dragons outnumbered you two-to-one, and the next one was upon you before the first had
even stopped bleeding.

She watched in numb silence as Stoick began to pick his way through the crowd of exhausted warriors. As she followed his movements, a detached part of her mind picked out her friends; Snotlout, The Twins, even Fishlegs. Ostensibly, the Chief was checking on his people, offering condolences and words of encouragement here and there, but she could see in his face that he was searching for someone - a search she knew would ultimately be futile.

Eventually Stoick came to stand beside Gobber. “Where is he?” he asked in a hushed voice, that she just managed to overhear, “Where’s Hiccup?”

The smith hesitated, before gently touching Stoick’s arm with his remaining hand. “I’m sorry, old friend. We couldn’t find him. I’ll -”

“No,” Stoick cut him off, “My son...” The chief took in a great, shuddering, breath. “Hiccup... is dead.”

Chapter End Notes

Pyrrhic - Of, relating to, or resembling Pyrrhus, king of Epirus; a victory won at too great a cost to have been worthwhile for the victor.

Skald - Poets who performed in the courts of Scandinavian and Icelandic leaders during the Viking age. Akin to the bards in Celtic societies.
Chapter 10: Memories

Pain dragged Hiccup from the soft womb of sleep. The hurt came in cycles; a shock of burning agony that faded to a mild sting before the pain hit him again. He opened his mouth, only to cough and splutter as his throat was flooded with foul-tasting brine. Pain exploded in his shoulder as his chest convulsed.

Blinking the tears from his eyes, he managed to roll onto his front and force himself up on shaky legs.

He stood on a narrow jumble of rocks between a sheer cliff in front of him, and the ocean to his tail. His nostrils opened subconsciously as he scented the air. The overpowering odour was that of the sea, but he could also detect smoke on the wind, and, yes, a trace of that indescribable scent that his new mind told him meant human; he was still on Berk.

How did I get here? He wondered. He remembered Stormfly helping him to fly, and taking off from the cove, then his memories became fuzzy and jumbled. He glanced down at his paws; A reddish-brown stain of dried blood marked the rocks beneath him.

“Time to die, Hiccup.”

It all came back to him in a rush. He’d fought the Night Fury in the skies over Berk, and the Queen - in control of the Fury’s body - had bitten his wing and thrown him into the sea. He silently thanked Ægir that the tides and currents had conspired to wash him up on the shores of the island, rather than dragging his unconscious body out into open ocean.

Gazing up at the cliff edge far above him, he gingerly tried spreading his wings. Agony shot through him and a strangled growl escaped his clenched jaw as soon as he tried to move his right wing.

“Oh the gods hate me,” he grumbled. “I spend a week stuck in a hole, only to be grounded again as soon as I get out.”

With a sigh, he began to pick his way along the coast, hoping to find a shallower bay where he could climb up to the island proper.

Of course, this being the Barbaric Archipelago, following the shore would be no leisurely stroll on the beach; the rocks were jagged and unstable, and if he’d still been human he would have tripped and twisted his ankle several times. It took an hour of picking his way over loose rocks, snarling and swearing every time he jogged his injured wing before he came across a suitable way up. It was an old rockfall, that over the years had accumulated enough windblown soil for several hardy plants to sprout up from the gaps between the boulders.

Hiccup walked to the shoreline and turned to face the tumbled-down cliff; with any luck the plants’ roots would give the fall enough structure to bear his weight. Before he could talk himself out it he took a deep breath, grit his teeth against the pain from his wing, and bounded forwards.

Just before he ran out of beach, Hiccup tensed his body and leapt up onto the first boulder in the
pile. As soon as he felt his paws touch stone he pushed off again, aiming for the next stone. For a heart-stopping moment he felt the rock shift as he landed, but he was moving again before it could fall. A few more bounds and he was scrambling up onto the top of the cliff, panting with exertion and exhilaration at accomplishing a feat of agility worthy of Astrid.

When he was able to breath normally again, he peered into the treeline, realising that his plan hadn’t extended beyond getting up the cliffs. He needed to know if Astrid and the rest of the village had survived, and he couldn’t exactly wander into the square. While he had no desire to be trapped there again, he began to wind his way between the pines towards ‘his’ cove, knowing that it would be the first place Astrid would seek him out.

*Assuming, of course, a voice whispered in the back of his mind, that Berk still exists.*

Astrid stood over the pile of rubble in numb silence. Where, now, there was only a mound of ash and charred timbers, there had once stood a house.

*Her house.*

She knew that houses on Berk rarely stood for more than a generation, however, by some whim of the Norns, her home had remained unscathed through more than fifteen years of raids. Now, despite the stark evidence in front of her, she was struggling to process that the building she’d grown up in was simply *gone*; that she’d never again be able to trace her fingers along the intricate designs her grandfather had carved around the doorframe.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I should have been here...I...” If she hadn’t snuck out of the village to be with Stormfly, if she hadn’t been doting on a *dragon* she might have been here to save her home.

Her father’s hand came down on her shoulder. “It’s okay, Astrid,” he told her, “We can rebuild. Your mother and Orvar survived, and that’s the important thing.”

She glanced to her side; her younger brother stood with Gunhilda nearby, staring at the ruins of their home with similarly numb expressions.

“Come on,” her father said gently, “Let’s salvage what we can and take it back to the hall.” Normally, when someone’s home was destroyed, they would stay with neighbours until their house could be rebuilt. However, given the scale of the destruction visited upon Berk by the Flock, Stoick had opened the doors of the great hall to all those who needed a place to sleep.

Grimacing, Astrid stepped over the blackened stump of what had been a wall. From memory, she picked her way through the rubble to where she’d kept her things, and began to sift through the ash at her feet. After a few minutes her fingers hit something solid and she pulled out the remains of her axe.

The handle was scorched black all along its length, and with a twist and a jerk she pulled it free, letting the ruined wood drop to the ground while she cradled the head in both hands. She ran her thumb over the runes carved in the centre of the two bits; *Sandraudiga* was the axe’s name. Before she had come into her possession, she had been her mother’s axe, and her mother’s before her, and so on as far back as anyone could remember. The story was that the axe was originally forged by a southern blacksmith who came to live in the Archipelago, and it was he who named the weapon *‘she who dyes the sand red’*.

She reverently set the axe head aside, vowing to get another handle cut for her as soon as lumber
was more plentiful. After a few more minutes of digging through the rubble she came up with her shoulder guards; the leather straps that held them in place had been destroyed by the fire, but the metal appeared to still be in good condition. She placed the armour and axe head on the small pile of things her father had already gathered, and helped Balder sift through the rest of the wreckage.

Some time later, she stood with her family at the foot of the mead hall’s steps. The bodies and rubble had been cleared away, however the scents of blood and fire still lingered in the air, and she tried to avoid looking at the crimson smears that marked where the bodies of dragons had been dragged away.

Astrid glanced around as other family groups began to trickle into the square, many of them clutching bags of salvage similar to the ones at her feet. Barely a murmur passed between them as they congregated around the base of the steps; above them, in the hall, Stoick was speaking with the tribal council, and the villagers were desperate to hear what had happened on the Nest hunt. By now, even the most thick-skulled of Berkians had realised that three ships had set out on the hunt, but only one had returned.

The silence unnerved Astrid; normally when a group of Vikings gathered you would expect at least one good-natured argument to break out. She picked out the Thorstons among the crowd; even the Twins were silent.

As her gaze drifted over the haggard faces in the half-full square, she realised that the crowd had stopped growing. It can’t be... she thought. Are we all that’s left?

Before anyone could answer her the great doors cracked open, and Stoick left the hall, followed by Spitelout, Gobber, and the rest of his council. He descended all but the last few steps, stopping at a point where he could survey his gathered people.

“I won’t lie to you,” he began, “the situation is grim, but I’ve spoken with the council, and it’ll be close, but we believe that as long as we complete repairs before the ice sets in, we should have enough resources stockpiled to make it through the winter.”

Astrid grimaced. She knew they kept grains and salted fish in the cellars below the great hall for emergencies; but could those supplies really sustain the whole village?

“Before we get to business, we must pay our respects.” Stoick continued. “First, to Gobber and his warriors, who defended our homes and families against the beasts twice during the hunt. Especially to Astrid Hofferson and the rest of the fire crew, who despite having not finished their training, took up arms alongside their parents in the battle last night - by all accounts, Astrid personally slew thirteen of the beasts.”

Astrid tried not to meet anybody’s gaze as a murmur of appreciation passed through the crowd. Thirteen. In a single night, she’d managed more kills than some managed in a year. Thirteen victims of The Queen’s control, any one of which, through naught but a twist of circumstance, could have been gentle, caring, Stormfly.

“Secondly,” Stoick continued once the praise had died down. “We must pay tribute to those who have gone to join the ranks of the Einherjar, both in the defence of the village and the search for the nest. Those who can, bury your dead, and in a week, we will hold a ceremony on the docks to commemorate all the fallen... Including my son.”

A respectful murmur rose from the crowd, and Astrid bowed her head. She knew what Stoick was doing. Hiccup had been missing in the wilderness for a week, and in that time there had been two dragon raids. From the chief’s perspective, he was already dead, and the village didn’t have the
manpower to spare on a search that would only result in a body.

“Enough of this!” somebody shouted, “Tell us what happened on the hunt!”

“Yeah!” Another agreed, “Tell us you found the Nest, at least!”

Stoick’s gaze fell. Oh no... Astrid thought.

“We didn’t even get close,” he announced in a monotone voice. “The dragons were on us as soon
as we hit the fog bank... the other ships went down in minutes. We picked up as many survivors as
we could, but if we’d stayed any longer, we would have been sunk as well.”

A deathly silence fell over the square. Two ships, each crewed with their finest warriors, lost. For
what? They were still no closer to finding the dragons’ nest.

“Gobber is overseeing repairs, and Phlegma is in charge of securing our food stores; report to one
of them for work. That is all.” With that, Stoick stepped down, the crowd parting before him as he
made his way towards his house.

Astrid could almost see the physical weight of his loss and the Village’s expectations on his
shoulders. She couldn't help but ask herself: had the Queen of Dragons done what no other force
on Midgard was capable of and crushed the indomitable Viking spirit under sheer weight of
losses?

Hiccup wasn’t alone in the forest. He couldn’t say exactly how he knew, only that he felt an
increasing sense of unease as he neared the cove.

He froze, nostrils dilating as he scented the air, and ear-flaps standing to attention, straining to pick
up any sign of the other presence. It took him a moment to sift through the myriad scents of nature,
but he could detect a faint odour of dragon, too recent to be leftover from the raid, and his ears
picked up the subtle sounds of something large lurking in nearby patch of thick brambles.

He spun towards the bush, instinctively bearing his teeth and keeping his head close the ground.
“Who’s there?” He growled.

The brambles shuddered and shook as a dirt -and blood - stained Nadder pushed her way into the
open. He backed up a step, growling a warning. Had one of the Queen’s dragons remained on
Berk? In response, the dragon simply bowed her nose to the leaf-litter, mantling her wings.

“I am relieved to see you alive, my Alpha,” she said.

Hiccup blinked and sat back on his haunches, recognising Astrid’s ‘friend’ beneath the grime.
“Stormfly?!” he asked, shocked, “What happened?”

“I had an unfortunate encounter with a bear while hiding from the Flock,” the Nadder replied. “I
could ask you the same question,” she continued, “Although from what I heard last night, I
surmise that you ignored my advice and tried to take on Yilbegän’s daughter, despite being
hopelessly outmatched in terms of experience.” She gestured with her muzzle to his injured
shoulder. “You’re lucky to have come away with just that.”

“She was attacking the villagers!” Hiccup exclaimed. “I couldn’t just stand - well, glide - there
and watch her do that!”

“That’s exactly what-!” Stormfly cut off her angry snarl, and let out a long breath. “I’m sorry, my
Hiccup sighed. “I feel like I’ve been thrown into the middle of a saga without having heard the first half. What in the nine realms is Yilbegan? Why are Night Furies its children? And why do you keep calling me ‘Alpha’?”

“I apologise, m- Hiccup.” She said, “I have no idea how confusing this must be for you.” She turned away and began to walk into the forest. “Come,” she called over her shoulder. “By necessity, the answers to your questions will be long, and this is not the place for them.”

Hiccup followed after Stormfly, and she led him to a patch of open ground on the rim of the cove. From the vantage point, they could see the crack in the cliffs that served as the entrance, and the body of the Nightmare sprawled on the ground below.

Stormfly bent her neck and breathed a white-hot jet of flame onto the ground. She circled, blackening a large swathe of grass, then settled down on one side of the patch of ash. “Come,” she invited, looking up at him. “Lie beside me.”

Hiccup apprehensively placed a paw on the ash, expecting it to come up hideously burned, instead he felt only a pleasant warmth through his scales. Of course, he thought, fireproof. He stepped fully onto the ‘bed’ and settled down, an unconscious purr rumbling in his chest as the soothing warmth seeped into his abused muscles. Stormfly shuffled closer to him - ignoring the respectful distance he’d left between them - and ran her tongue up his right foreleg, over his injured shoulder. He flinched away from her, only to hiss in pain as the motion tugged at his wound.

“What are you doing?!” he demanded, almost rising to his paws.

“The Sharing of Tongues - mutual grooming, as you may put it - is an ancient ritual among dragons.” Stormfly explained. “Before The Queen forced us all into one flock, it was the basis of the ties that defined the Dragons of the North as a civilised race; the bonds between mates and their offspring, between a hunter and her wing-partners, and -” here, she met his gaze with a pointed look “- between an Alpha and their subordinates.”

“I’m sorry,” Hiccup said, relaxing on the warm ashes. “I didn’t mean to offend.”

He tried not to tense up when she leaned in towards him again. “I don’t want to make you uncomfortable,” Stormfly told him softly, “but I need to clean your wounds.”

Hiccup said nothing, but allowed her to continue. The sensation of her tongue gliding over his scales wasn’t as uncomfortable as he’d expected, and his wound started to feel better after only a couple passes.

For several seconds the only sound was the gentle rasping of Stormfly’s tongue.

“What’s your name?” He blurted out suddenly.

Stormfly paused in her ministrations, pulling her head back slightly. “Did you not call me by ‘Stormfly’ earlier?” she asked.

“That’s what Astrid named you,” Hiccup replied. “What’s your real name?”

Stormfly tilted her head in confusion.

“What did your parents call you?”
Stormfly didn’t answer immediately; she stared off into the forest, her eyes unfocused, peering into some memory only she could see. At the base of her neck - just above her shoulders - her blue and white scales were broken by four parallel, bloody slashes. Hiccup winced; on impulse, he leaned in and gently ran his tongue over the cuts. Stormfly hummed quietly and shifted slightly, but made no move to stop him. The metallic taste of her blood filled his mouth, but he continued to clean her wound just as she had done for his shoulder.

“The Queen’s control,” Stormfly began - Hiccup felt her throat vibrate beneath his tongue - “It’s insidious. It doesn’t just take away your free will; over time it erodes your very identity. At first you remember everything that happened before she took over, but then things start to... slip away. It’s subtle, taking inconsequential things first, so you don’t notice it immediately, but after a while...” Stormfly shuddered. “After a while, you start to question whether there was even a life before the Queen.”

“I’m sorry,” Hiccup whispered, pulling away from cleaning her wound a moment. “How long were you...?”

“Seasons,” Stormfly replied. “I was barely an adult when I first fell under her control... I remember the important details of my life before, but none of the specifics. I don’t think I ever knew my sire, and my dam died shortly before I became part of the Flock. If my parents had a name for me, The Queen took it from me.” The Nadder was silent for a time. “The only things I remember clearly from that time are my dam’s Songs.”

“Songs?” Hiccup questioned, leaning back so he could look up at her face.

“If you wish it, I’ll tell you my story - what little of it I remember - later, but for you to fully understand my history, I must first answer your previous questions. For now, know that those songs are the reason I know much of what I’m about to tell you.”

Hiccup nodded his head in acceptance. “So, should I keep calling you Stormfly?”

“If you wish, my Alpha,” she replied, “The Human female - Astrid, I believe - was the first being to show kindness towards me since my dam died; I would be honoured to bear the name she gave me.”

“Okay, Stormfly,” Hiccup said, settling his head down on his paws. “You promised me some answers.”

Stormfly didn’t answer immediately; Instead, she hummed softly and leaned in. Her tongue flicked out, licking away the patches of soot and blood that the sea hadn’t managed to remove.

Eventually, she started to speak between passes of her tongue. “In the beginning,” she began, speaking in an even, measured metre, as if recalling a memorised verse. “When the world was formed by the clash of cosmic forces, there was darkness, broken only by the fires of dragons and those of the newborn Earth itself. Into this world of night and flame, there came two dragons, each blessed with a small spark of the powers that had created the world itself.

“First among them was Koyash, the first Red Death. Her spirit was of Chaos and fire; greedy and all consuming. Her counterpart was the first of the Bewilderbeast, Ülgen, who was like the glacier; slow moving and deliberate, but inexorable. Both Ülgen and Koyash had the power to sway lesser dragons to their wills, and thus the first Alphas were born.”

Red Death? Bewilderbeast? Hiccup thought - he’d never heard of those dragons before - but then, the Queen has the ability to control dragons; she must be one of them.
“What about Night Furies?” he asked, “You called me Alpha as well.”

Hiccup raised his head and began to clean a patch of dried mud and leaves from Stormfly’s flank while she continued her tale.

“Born from two opposing forces, it was inevitable that the two Alphas and their flocks came into conflict. The fighting was ferocious, and would have destroyed the dragon race, if not for the third Force; the Preserver, the cosmic balance.

The Preserver’s power came to five dragons, and together they became Yilbegän, The Five-who-are-one, first of the Night Furies. Yilbegän shared the power of the other Alphas, but rather than amassing his own flock, he used his power to counter that of Koyash and Ülgen, keeping their conflict from destroying the dragons.

With the Alphas held in stalemate, the dragons prospered, and eventually the original Alphas passed away - for, despite their power, they were still mortal. As the first Alphas died, some of their energy was passed on to their closest followers, becoming the next generation of Alphas, while the rest illuminated the darkened world; in the day Koyash’s fire warms us, while at night, Ülgen’s gaze lights the world, and Yilbegän’s bodies patrol the sky.”

Hiccup blinked, staring up at the weak sunlight as it streamed through the leaves. Growing up, he’d been taught that the sun was a chariot driven by the goddess Sól as she fled the wolf Sköll; was it any more plausible to believe that it was in fact the spirit of some long-dead dragon from the beginning of the world?

Stormfly spoke of Yilbegän, Koyash and Ülgen as if they were the Æsir; she couldn’t really believe he was the descendant of some dragon god, right?

“Forgive me,” Hiccup said, “That was a fascinating story, but why are you telling me this?”

“Believe it or not,” Stormfly said, shuffling around slightly to lick at the scrapes on his abdomen left by the rocky shore. “This is your history now; I would be forsaking my duty if I didn’t tell you your people’s oldest tale.”

Hiccup hummed thoughtfully for a moment. “You said that the Night Furies had the power to counter the Alpha’s control, right?” Pausing her ministrations, Stormfly nodded. “So why is the Queen able to control the Night Fury - I mean, the one who transformed me - and nearly do the same to me?”

“The fact that you can resist the Queen’s will at all is because of your Alpha blood.” Stormfly’s voice dropped into a sombre register. “But as you know first hand, a Night Fury’s power is not infinite; a lone, inexperienced Fury is no match for a full-grown Red Death.”

“The other Night Fury,” Hiccup asked softly, “What happened to her?”

The shrill music of a songbird rang out, and Hiccup’s ear flaps rose instinctively, pinpointing the sound to the lower branches of a tree to his left.

“Alas,” Stormfly began, in the same rhythm as her previous narrative. “Her story is a tragic one, but it is also entwined with the origins of our current situation.

“After the deaths of the Trinity - the first Alphas - the Dragons flourished; balanced between the greed of Koyash’s children, the restraint of Ülgen’s offspring, and with the Night Furies ensuring neither side gained an advantage, they were able to spread across the entire world.
“This balance persisted for untold ages until the ancestors of humankind appeared on a continent far south of here. As your former kind spread across the world, the Alphas began to decline - and with them, the whole dragon race. Some said that the decline was due to competition with your ancestors for the resources to feed the titanic, ancient Alphas; while others believed the rise of humanity was simply a sign of a changing world. Whatever the reason, by the time your antecedents first sailed these northern waters, Dragonkind was a shadow of its former self.

“In this time, a Red Death was born in the North. Like all her kind, she hatched with a greed for power and lust for control. Somehow, this young Alpha was able to secrete herself from the eyes of the Furies and Bewilderbeast, and, as countless seasons passed, she gathered her flock - at first drawing in the occasional wandering dragon, her strength growing, winter after winter, until eventually she could bend whole nests to her will.”

Stormfly paused gravely.

“By the time the other Alphas realised what she was doing it was too late - the Queen’s flock was several times larger than those ruled by even the oldest of her kind. The Furies tried to stop her: they gathered a great host of every trained warrior among their number and, as one, they flew on the Queen’s nest. That day, the fury that your kind is named for was unleashed.”

The whole forest seemed to hush as the Nadder’s voice dropped to a sombre whisper.

“The seas around the Queen’s nest ran red with blood as the dragons fought. The Furies slew thousands of the Queen’s dragons, as each of their number was the match for ten or more of the Flock. But, despite the Furies’ skill and heroism, the Queen’s greater numbers eventually won out, and they were slaughtered to the dragon.

“In response, the Queen’s flock descended on the Furies’ homeland, massacring every dragon they encountered. Be they hatching, elder or gravid mother, it mattered not; every dragon who had remained behind when their kind went to war was slain. All, save for one; barely more than a fledgling at the time, she was taken by the Flock and dragged before their master. The Queen broke that young Fury’s mind, enslaving her and using her as a spy to root out the Furies that had escaped the destruction of their home.”

Realisation slowly dawned on Hiccup. “So the Night Fury, the one that transformed me, is...”

“Yes, she is the very same Fury; last of her kind, and witness to her people’s destruction.”

Hiccup didn’t reply, his mind whirling. He finally knew the full story behind Berk’s war with the Dragons, and it was far older than the village and his former people - if Stormfly was to be believed, it was older than humanity itself, having origins at the very beginning of the world.

“After destroying the Furies,” Stormfly continued, “The Queen turned her flock on the other Alphas, killing them one by one and enslaving their nests.

“That is why you are so important Hiccup. Only an Alpha can stand against the Queen, and aside from Koyash’s spawn, you are the only free Alpha in the world. I don’t care that you used to be human; all I care is that you are my people’s only hope for freedom.”

Hiccup dropped his head onto his paws with a soft moan, his tail almost unconsciously swinging around to shade his face with an extended fin. He was tired and his wounded shoulder ached, but above that he was sick of it all. He wished he could go back to his life in Berk. Back home, he could be reasonably certain of his next meal, and that it would be cooked. His father’s silent disapproval, and Snotlout and the Twins’ regular bullying was preferable to spending his nights
cowering in a dank hole, dreading the appearance of the Queen.

“Why?” He asked in a soft croon, “Why, if the Queen was in control of the Night Fury, would she turn me into the one thing that could possibly threaten her?”

“I don’t know for certain,” Stormfly replied, “But I suspect that the Queen’s control never really took with the Night Fury, and that there was always a small part of her resisting. She would only have had the power for a single transformation; she must have seen something in you that made her choose to gamble everything on your life.”

“Just what I needed,” Hiccup murmured. “Another life depending on me.”

Part of him wanted to dismiss Stormfly’s tales as fantasy, but the depth of emotion with which she spoke told him that her words were truth. A mere week ago, the idea of being responsible for another’s life was an abstract, distant concept - deep down, some part of him had known he’d been Stoick’s heir in name only. Now, the lives of untold thousands of dragons depended on him, in a contest that he had as much chance of winning as the king of England did of turning back the tide.

“I know how you feel,” Stormfly crooned into his ear. “The weight of expectations on you, and the sheer impossible enormity of the task you face; it’s paralyzing.”

Hiccup said nothing, and the Nadder began to speak again.

“After the Night Furies fell, a group of common dragons came together, they knew what was coming for them, and that they had no hope of resisting it, but they were determined to ensure that their people survived. Calling themselves the Songkeepers, they travelled to as many of the nests as they could, and listened to the stories and legends that the dragons told, with a promise to remember the songs they heard and teach them to their hatchlings. That way, when the Queen eventually fell - for no living being can be truly immortal - the memory of Dragonkind would not have been lost. Finally, they vanished into self-imposed exile, in the hope of escaping the Queen’s conquest.”

“So you...” Hiccup began.

“My dam,” Stormfly corrected “She was a Songkeeper - by the time I hatched, the Queen had already won; as far as we knew, we were the only free dragons left. My dam had specialised in the stories and legends surrounding the Night Furies, and keeping her promise, she taught me everything she learnt before... before she...”

The Nadder faltered, and Hiccup felt her shudder beside him. For a moment he was paralysed with indecision - he’d never been very good at comforting people when he was human, and now he had no idea what was considered socially acceptable contact among dragons.

No, He told himself, She saved your life, this is the least you can do.

“It’s okay,” he said, shuffling closer to her - so that their flanks touched. “You don’t have to...”

“No,” Stormfly interrupted, “I owe you this story.

“Some dragon species can survive equally well feeding off the land or the sea, but Nadders, we can’t hunt very well on land - we need open water. I was hatched on the mainland to the east of here, the Queen’s dragons owned the shore, so we were forced to live inland, barely surviving on the meagre offerings of the lakes and rivers, and scavenging wolf kills when we could. One winter... my dam could barely find enough food to feed a Terror, let alone the two of us... yet she forced me to eat it all regardless.”
Hiccup winced. He’d heard of similar things happening on Berk: in particularly harsh winters, grandparents sometimes went without food so that their children and grandchildren - the warriors that repelled the dragon attacks - could keep fighting.

“Eventually, my dam, she... she went to sleep and never woke up.” Stormfly shuddered again, and was silent for a time. “I knew what would happen if I went to the coast, but I was barely more than a hatchling, and I was starving. The Flock found me while I was struggling to fish, half-starved and exhausted, I had no chance of escaping them... Seasons passed, under her control, and I grew from a scrawny hatchling into an adult... then one day I was flying over the ocean when I was brought down by a group of humans using some kind of net-launching device.”

Dragon trappers, Hiccup thought.

“The impact with the sea knocked me unconscious,” Stormfly continued. “When I woke up, I was being dragged onto their ship, still trapped in the net, but, more importantly, I was free from the Queen’s will.

“It took me some time to gather my thoughts after being controlled for so long, but as I lay there, bound, in that ship’s dark hold I realised that I was probably the last of the Songkeepers, and that the few scattered fragments of my youth that I could recall were all that remained of the Age of Alphas.”

Stormfly turned her head to gaze down upon him. “My situation was helpless. As far as I knew, I was the last hope for the memory of the dragons before the Queen, and I was trapped, still weakened after regaining my mind, and sailing towards torture or death at the hands of humans.

“I spent a large part of that voyage wallowing in self-pity,” she admitted. “But there was part of me that refused to give in and let my dam’s sacrifice be in vain. So I began to speak. The dragons that I shared that hold with had been under the Queen’s control far longer than me, and probably couldn’t even understand me; but I told them everything that I could remember. When we landed and I was moved onto another ship, I told the dragons with me the same thing, resolving not to give up and share what I knew with as many prisoners I could, telling myself that even if I died, as long as the memory of the old ways existed somewhere, the Queen hadn’t won.”

Stormfly paused for a beat. “Then, seasons later, a human fledgling opened my cage in the dead of night, with food in her hand and an apology on her lips. She told me a story about her alpha’s hatchling getting turned into a Night Fury, and I dared to hope that my survival may not have been in vain.” The Nadder’s tongue ghosted over his uninjured shoulder. “I know it feels like an insurmountable obstacle before you Hiccup, but if you give up, you doom us all. But if we keep resisting, defying Her in whatever way we can, the universe will give us a chance to correct the balance.”

Hiccup took in a deep breath. Regardless of what Stormfly believed about the bloodlines of ancient dragons, he had no part in her war - he’d been forced into this body against his will and it had nearly cost him his life on several occasions. He had his flight now, so as soon as his wing healed, what was keeping him here? If his former people saw him they wouldn’t hesitate in attacking, and the longer he remained, he risked death - or worse - at the will of the Queen.

No, a voice within him whispered, you made a choice when you took pity on the Night Fury. If you won’t kill a single dragon, can you really leave her whole species to their fate?

Astrid, He thought. It wouldn’t just be the dragons he’d be leaving to the Norns’ will; it would be his ex-clansmen as well. Berk was losing the war, and as much as his childhood had been miserable, it had still made him; he couldn’t abandon the villagers either.
He exhaled slowly. “You’re right.” He told Stormfly. “I have no idea how I’m going to be able to face the Queen, but we can’t give up.”

His ear-fins rose at the distant sound of rustling in the forest. A familiar scent drifted to him on the breeze.

“We need a plan.”

Chapter End Notes

Mythology:

Ægir - The giant of the sea in Norse myth; personification of the ocean’s power.

Sandraudiga - A lesser Germanic goddess attested to in a Latin inscription found in the Netherlands (hence the story about the original forger of the axe coming from the south).

Einherjar - the warriors brought to Valhalla by the Valkyries to fight in the events of Ragnarök.

Æsir - One of the two principal pantheons of Norse gods (the other being the Vanir) including Odin, Frigg, Thor and Týr.

Historical Note: The ‘King of England’ mentioned is King Cnut (often anglicised as King Canute) who was also king of Denmark and Norway in the same period. He is famous for allegedly attempting to order the rising tide to halt. Interestingly, in contrast to the context in which this story is usually invoked, the act was intended as a gesture of humility, not arrogance. (For those interested, this also dates the story to taking place sometime between 1016 and 1035)
Chapter 11 - Plans

Astrid grunted and swung her hammer downwards, driving the last nail into place with a satisfying thunk. With a sigh, she set down her tools and looked out over the Magnusson’s freshly repaired roof towards the edge of the village.

I can’t take it, she thought, I need to know.

As far as she could tell, she was the only person on Berk who knew that there had been two Night Furies over the village in the battle. Hiccup had saved her from the Zippleback, and he’d appeared to be fighting the other Fury, but then she’d lost track of them until one of them attacked just before Stoick landed. The uncertainty gnawed at her from within, and she couldn’t stop imagining him lying injured somewhere on the island, or worse his broken body dashed against the rocks by the sea.

“No” she whispered, he couldn’t be dead, not after she’d put so much effort into keeping him alive; not after he’d saved her life in return.

Or what if it was Hiccup who attacked us? a voice whispered from a dark corner of her mind. So far, he had seemed mostly unaffected by the Queen’s control, but what if his immunity ran out?

With a furtive glance around, she left her tools and crawled to the edge of the roof. Her legs gave out on landing, drawing a pained noise from her throat, and sending her sprawling in the dirt. It felt like there wasn’t an inch of her that had escaped injury in the battle, but she could walk, so wasn’t worthy of the healers’ attention.

Gods above, she was tired. She’d managed to grab a few fitful hours of sleep in a chair at the back of the Mead Hall, but it hadn’t helped; with the secret trips to see Hiccup and Stormfly, it felt like weeks since she’d last got a full night’s sleep.

Still, she was a Viking, she was made of sterner stuff. With a soft growl, she forced herself up onto all fours and then her feet, making her way past the blackened wreckage of the village’s outskirts, into the shade of the trees.

Unable to withstand the uncertainty any longer, she found her pace increasing as she made for Hiccup’s cove, hoping that if he survived he’d think to meet her there.

She burst through the undergrowth into a clearing on the rim of the cove, stumbling to a sudden stop. Across from her, on a patch of blackened grass, two dragons lay side-by-side. Relief and elation rushing through her, she ran towards them. “Hiccup! Stormfly! You’re alive!”

Hiccup rose and swept his tail across the ground in front of him. ‘ASTRID,’ he wrote in the ash, ‘ARE YOU OKAY?’

She came to a stop and looked down at herself. Her clothes were torn and stained with blood and soot.

“I will be,” she replied, “My house burned down in the raid, these are... these are the only clothes that I own.”

Hiccup crooned softly. ‘I’M SORRY.’
“It’s okay,” she replied, brushing off his concern. He unconsciously shuffled his wings, letting out a sharp hiss of pain. Her gaze snapped up to him, landing on a semicircle of puncture marks surrounding his right shoulder.

“Hiccup!” she exclaimed, “What happened!?”

‘THE QUEEN TRIED TO DROWN ME,’ he wrote. ‘THE NIGHT FURY CAUGHT ME, DID THIS, THEN THREW ME IN THE SEA.’

Astrid winced; he was lucky to be alive. “Can you...?”

Hiccup shook his head with a sad croon.

Grounded again, she thought.

‘HOW WAS IT?’ he asked. ‘IT LOOKED BAD.’

It’s hopeless, she thought. We don’t have enough people to rebuild the village and refill the food stores in time. If the dragons attack in those numbers again...

No, she gritted her teeth, You can’t just give up.

“It was,” she admitted, in a flat tone. “Just over half the village is left.”

Hiccup was physically staggered by her words, slumping to the ground, whimpering. She crouched down to his eye-level.

“Hiccup...” words failed her; how could she offer comfort when she could barely process the facts herself?

‘IT’S MY FAULT,’ Hiccup wrote with an unsteady paw ‘I COULDN’T STOP HER - EVEN AS A DRAGON, I’M USELESS.’

“No,” Astrid told him firmly. “Everyone in the village had been preparing for that fight all their lives, but you, you’d been a Night Fury for barely a week - For Odin’s sake, you only learned to fly that night! But you still helped, Hel, you probably saved us; while you distracted the Night Fury, you bought time for Stoick to land and reinforce-”

Hiccup’s pupils narrowed, and a haunted expression passed over the boy-turned-dragon’s features.

‘MY DAD’S HERE?’ He wrote.

“Relax Hiccup,” she told him, “Nobody knows about you.”

For a moment they were silent, the gravity of the situation sinking in. Hiccup was grounded again, trapped on the island and vulnerable. Meanwhile, the fate of Berk balanced on a knife’s edge, her people were wounded and desperate; unless they found some advantage in their situation they would surely fall when the dragons returned.

“Hiccup,” Astrid breathed, “We have to do something.”

The Night Fury grunted something in a dejected, dismissive tone.

“I’m serious Hiccup,” she told him, hope kindling in her chest. “We Vikings have fought dragons in the same way since we first sailed here. Now, for the first time in seven generations, we have new intelligence: we know about the Queen, we know that the Dragons aren’t willing participants
in this war - *gods*, we know that dragons are actually intelligent!” She took a breath. “If we carry on fighting as we are, the Queen will kill us all; we have to go to Stoick and tell him what we know.”

‘WHAT WILL THAT ACHIEVE?’ He responded. ‘EVEN IF YOU COULD CONVINCE MY DAD NOT TO KILL US - THAT’S A BIG IF - WE DON’T KNOW WHERE THE NEST IS AND THE QUEEN STILL OUTNUMBERS US.’

Hiccup watched Astrid’s face fall and he let out a soft growl of frustration. He couldn't stand by and watch his home’s destruction, and he’d promised Stormfly that he’d help free her people, but there was no way he could think of to fight the Queen that didn't end in his death or enslavement.

“There has to be something,” Astrid thought aloud. “The Queen’s control can’t be perfect; there must be some weakness we can exploit, use to turn her army against her.”

“There is a way,” Stormfly hummed. “It's more risky than I’d like, but we don't have many options at this point.”

Hiccup turned to her in surprise; the Nadder had been quiet since Astrid arrived. “What is it?”

Instead of answering, Stormfly nosed at where he’d been scratching runes in the soil. “You are communicating with Astrid using these marks in the dirt?”

He nodded.

“A physical form of language,” she muttered to herself, “If only the Songkeepers had something like this...” She looked up at him. “Can you translate my words for Astrid?”

“It's slow,” Hiccup replied, “but I'll try.”

Astrid glanced between the two of them, a concerned expression on her face. “Hiccup, what’s going on?”

‘SHE SAID SHE KNOWS SOMETHING WE CAN USE’

Hiccup heard her breath catch in his throat and she turned to stare at the Nadder, mouth agape - as if just noticing the dragon was there.

Astrid recovered a moment later. “I'm sorry, Stormfly,” she said softly, her hand going to her fringe. “I'm not used to thinking of other dragons as intelligent.”

Stormfly leaned in close to her. “Think nothing of it, Hatchling,” she crooned, the passage of her breath disturbing Astrid’s hair. Astrid was silent as the Nadder began to speak.

“Earlier, I told Hiccup of the three Alpha Species: The Red Death and the Bewilderbeast, immense dragons with the power to sway the minds of lesser dragons, and also the Night Furies, gifted with the ability to resist the Alphas’ influence as well as many other abilities that belie their smaller stature.”

Hiccup scratched runes as fast as he could while still remaining legible, scrambling to summarise Stormfly’s words.

“The power wielded by the Alphas - by the Queen to control her flock, and by the Night Furies to grant them their unique abilities - comes from the same source: The Aurlös.”
“The what?” Hiccup asked.

“We call it The Trinity’s Fire,” Stormfly explained. “Some nights you can see the fires of the original Alphas shining through cracks in the barrier between our world and the cosmic forces, illuminating the sky with great sheets of flame.”

Hiccup suddenly understood. “You mean the Northern Lights.”

“Yes, I believe that is the term the humans use.” The Nadder replied. “The manipulation of this energy is what manifests as the powers we call the Aür - to give the Alpha’s abilities their proper name. When spread over a wide area, the Aür can be used to sway the minds of any dragon within range. Or, if they concentrate all their power in one place, an Aür user can achieve many things, including - “ Stormfly’s eyes flashed as she looked up at him “ - changing one living being into another.”

“Wait a minute,” Hiccup said, remembering something she’d said before. “You said the only reason I could resist the Queen was because I’m an Alpha; it’s because I have this power, isn’t it?”

Stormfly nodded.

“Could I use it to turn myself back?” The question was out of his mouth before he’d consciously registered the thought.

The Nadder exhaled noisily; a sound somewhere between a sigh and a growl. “I hoped I had impressed the importance of your position onto you, my Alpha, but, as you have asked, I will answer: Truthfully, I do not know. Your kind is naturally secretive, and the songs I remember rarely speak of the Night Furies’ powers and, when they do, it is hard to tell what is a truthful account and what is a fabrication of the teller. Likely the only being who knows the answer to your question is the one who changed you.”

“I’m sorry,” Hiccup murmured, avoiding her gaze.

Eventually, Stormfly found her voice again. “You were correct, my Alpha; the Aür is what grants you protection from the Queen’s power. However, at the moment you are only using your power instinctively; you need to learn to control it consciously, and extend its protection to others, to have any hope against the Queen.”

“And how am I meant to do that?” Flying had been hard enough to learn; now she expected him to figure out magic? “I don’t suppose you happen to know a song to teach me how?”

Stormfly bowed her head. “I do not, my Alpha. The Night Furies were notoriously protective of their homeland, rarely allowing outsiders to visit their nests. If those honoured few ever spoke of the teaching of Night Fury hatchlings, the Songkeepers did not hear them.” She raised her muzzle again. “Learning the Aür is a matter for you, and you alone, Hiccup.”

“Ahem.” Astrid tapped her foot impatiently as Hiccup spun around to face her. Finally realising that he’d been ignoring her for the last few minutes, he hurriedly finished writing out Stormfly’s words.

If having a conversation - albeit an indirect one - with a dragon wasn’t strange enough, she could scarcely believe the words Hiccup transcribed. If she was interpreting his hastily scribbled runes
correctly, he hadn’t just had the questionable misfortune of being transformed into the most mysterious of dragons, he was also a leader of the entire dragon race, and in possession of magical powers even the dragons didn’t fully understand!

Hiccup finished the last sentence and stepped back, settling down on his haunches.

‘IF I CAN LEARN TO USE THIS POWER, I CAN FREE DRAGONS FROM THE QUEEN’S CONTROL.’

Astrid’s breath caught in her throat. ‘That’s it!’ She exclaimed in a whisper. ‘If you can free dragons from the Queen’s control, they’ll jump at the chance to fight against her, right?’ She looked to Stormfly and after a moment’s hesitation, the dragon nodded. ‘With the dragons fighting her as well, we’ll have the numbers to- Damnit! No that won’t work,’ she cut herself off, realising a flaw in her half-formed plan. ‘The Queen will figure out what we’re doing, and she’ll send enough dragons to overwhelm us.’

Hiccup attracted her attention with a coughing growl. ‘YOU’RE FORGETTING ONE ADVANTAGE.’

“What?”

‘ME. I’M A NIGHT FURY, AND THE QUEEN THINKS I’M DEAD.’

“How does that help?” She asked, not following his logic.

‘WE DOWN AT LEAST A COUPLE OF HER DRAGONS EVERY RAID, RIGHT?’ She nodded, still baffled. ‘SO WOULD SHE THINK AN EXTRA DRAGON OR TWO EACH RAID UNUSUAL, ESPECIALLY IF THEY NEVER SAW THEIR “DEATH” COMING?’

“Hiccup that’s brilliant!” While Berk’s situation was desperate, her people were stubborn; if they had a goal to aim for, they would find a way to hold out through the winter, and with Hiccup stealing dragons every raid, by the time Spring came and the ice receded they could...

“There’s still one problem,” she thought aloud.

Hiccup tilted his head and raised an ear-flap in unspoken question.

“We still need to speak to your father,” she answered. “The dragons that you free are going to need to stay somewhere, and how many do you think you can hide in these woods before some unfortunate Viking stumbles across them?” Astrid was riding on a wave of hope, and at that moment she felt like even the immovable object that was Stoick the Vast could be made to shift.

“Perhaps,” she continued, pacing the clearing as she thought aloud. “There might be a way, we can demonstrate that dragons can be trusted.”

‘HOW?’

“The training dragons,” she explained. “Most of them have been locked up in there for years, so the Queen won’t be controlling them, right?” Stormfly nodded. “If I can get in there and show them that I don’t mean any harm, like I did with you,” she nodded towards the Nadder, “Then I’ll be able to show the Village what the dragons are really like.”

As her thoughts turned to the training ring, a terrible realisation struck her; she’d left the arena and Stormfly’s cage wide open! She spun towards the Nadder, mouth half-open, only to hesitate when she realised what she was about to ask of her.
“Stormfly,” she began softly, “I need you to come back to the village with me, to the ring.” The avian dragon blinked slowly. “The village has been too busy with repairs so far, but eventually someone will notice you’re gone, and if Stoick figures out what we’re doing before I can convince him...” she trailed off; she didn’t know what exactly the village would do to her if they knew she was working with the dragons, but it wouldn’t be pleasant. “Gods be willing, it should only be for a week or two until I can convince Stoick you’re not a threat.”

Plus, she thought to herself, she’d feel a lot safer going into the ring unarmed if there was a dragon she knew on the other side of the bars.

Hiccup grunted to draw her attention. ‘I KNOW MY DAD; HE’S NOT PERSUADED EASILY - ARE YOU SURE THIS WILL WORK?’

“We’re desperate, Hiccup,” she told him, “and I’m offering a chance to survive; we have no choice but to take it.”

Stormfly trilled, rising to her feet and stepping towards Astrid.

‘I WILL ACCOMPANY YOU,’ Hiccup translated. ‘WE’RE BOTH DEPENDING ON YOU, AND THIS PLAN IS OUR BEST OPTION TO BOTH PROTECT YOUR VILLAGE AND END THE QUEEN.’

“Thank you,” Astrid said softly. Speaking up, she added “I - We’d - best be getting back to the village before anyone notices. Stay safe, Hiccup.”

The boy-turned-dragon nodded in farewell. ‘GOOD LUCK’

Astrid almost turned to leave; she hesitated, glancing back at the Night Fury.

“Hiccup,” she began, haltingly. “I want to say something to Stormfly, do you mind translating for her?”

‘OF COURSE NOT,’ he replied, taking a half-step back and gesturing with his head to the Nadder.

Astrid turned to face her.

“Stormfly...” she began, “I...” Something suddenly occurred to her. “Wait, what’s your real name? I’ve been calling you ‘Stormfly’ because, well...” it didn’t matter. “But you must have your own name, right?”

Stormfly trilled softly. Astrid heard Hiccup’s claws scratching in the dirt and looked over.

‘I DID’ he wrote for her. ‘LIKE ALL DRAGONS HATCHED IN THE AGE OF ALPHAS, MY PARENTS GAVE ME A NAME, BUT IT IS ONE OF THE MANY THINGS I LOST TO THE QUEEN’

“Oh...” Before she could process the ramifications of that statement, Hiccup swept his tail across the ground and continued writing.

‘I LOST MY DAM AT A YOUNG AGE.’ he translated. ‘YOU WERE THE FIRST BEING TO SHOW KINDNESS TO ME SINCE THEN. ACTING ONLY ON YOUR CONSCIENCE, YOU HEALED MY WOUNDS AND LET ME FLY FREE FOR THE FIRST TIME IN SEASONS.’

Stormfly paused to nuzzle at her, before crooning more words to Hiccup.
'IT IS AN HONOUR TO BEAR THE NAME YOU CHOSE FOR ME.'

“Thank you,” Astrid breathed, blinking several times in quick succession; she would not cry.

She took a deep breath, and raised her hand to Stormfly’s chin. “If I knew what I know now, I would never have been in that ring, and you wouldn’t have had to suffer what I did to your wing.” She took a shaky breath, determined to get everything she had to say out in one go. “I’m sorry, not just for my actions, but for everything you must have been through at the hands of my people; and, that after saving both mine and Hiccup’s lives, I repay you by asking you to go back into captivity.”

Stormfly held the contact for a heartbeat before pulling away to speak to Hiccup. 'YOUR WORDS ARE APPRECIATED, HATCHLING. HOWEVER, KNOW THAT I HAVE ALREADY FORGIVEN YOU, AND THAT I GO BACK BOTH OUT OF OBLIGATION TO MY ALPHA AND PEOPLE, AND TO PROTECT MY FRIEND.'

“I...” she felt her eyes watering again. What had she done to deserve this devotion?

Stormfly simply hummed and took a step back, crouching down into a position Astrid recognised instantly.

For a fleeting moment she was hesitant, wary of being seen flying over the village in broad daylight, then the memories of their wondrous, magical first flight won out, and she quickly clambered onto the offered back. “Be careful of the village, okay girl?”

Stormfly chirped in acknowledgement, then Astrid felt her tense beneath her. No sooner had she braced herself, Stormfly exploded into motion; her powerful legs launched them into the air, a pause, then her wings flapped, driving them further upwards. Unlike their first flight, the blistering acceleration lasted barely a moment before they levelled out. Astrid opened her eyes, finding them skimming above the treetops, heading east, away from the village.

An elated chuckle bubbled out out of her as she loosened her grip on Stormfly, taking in a deep breath. Even though they were only a few yards above the forest floor, the air rushing past her and tugging at her braid was somehow, impossibly, fresher. She glanced down, watching the trees speeding below them in a green blur, faster than anyone on the ground could ever hope to achieve.

The ground below them plummeted into the sea at a sheer cliff. Astrid had a split-second to process this before Stormfly’s wings snapped to her sides and they dropped towards the ocean. She screamed and clung tighter to the dragon beneath her as the vicious rocks at the base of the cliffs hurtled towards them. What must have been mere moments, but felt like aeons later, Stormfly’s wings caught the wind again and they shot forwards, skimming across the ocean’s surface, the Nadder’s outstretched claws clipping white caps as they passed beneath.

When the realisation that she wasn’t about to die eventually reached her brain, Astrid sat up, letting out a shout of pure adrenaline. Stormfly joined in with a joyous screech, startling a flock of seabirds from their cliffside nests. Astrid craned her neck backwards, gazing upwards in amazement as the birds scattered in a cacophony of shrieks and caws.

In a mirror of their first flight together, the sun was low to the eastern horizon, sparkling dazzlingly off the sea as Stormfly cruised low around the eastern coast of the island. A tinge of disappointment entered her thoughts as the headland that held the training ring came into view and Stormfly climbed steeply, alighting upon the cliffside they had taken off from before the battle.

Astrid winced as she slid to the ground; if riding on dragonback was going to become a regular
occurrence for her, she would have to do something to protect her inner thighs, or Stormfly’s scales would completely shred the skin off her legs.

The ring was still in the state she’d left it in; the arena gate, the Nadder cage, yawning open. Stormfly stepped around her, dipping her head with a soft croon. Astrid placed her hand on the Nadder’s muzzle, mouth hanging half-open, unable to find the words to express the mixture of gratitude, sorrow, and regret that churned in her gut. Eventually, she settled on “Thank you Stormfly, again, for everything.”

The Nadder held her gaze for a breath, then blinked slowly and moved away, stepping into her cage without a sound. Astrid reluctantly followed after the dragon, pushing on the heavy doors until they locked with reverberating, metallic clang. With a long sigh, she turned and rested her back against the cold iron.

*It’s only temporary, she told herself.*

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Hiccup wandered moonlit paths between pillars of pine, restless. Being free of the cove helped, but still, he was *bored*, and worse, *hungry*. He’d seen Astrid only once since she’d flown off with Stormfly three days ago; a few minutes stolen on the edge of the forest between repairing the village and replenishing Berk’s food stock. He was alone.

He knew that wandering the island wasn’t going to help conserve the energy remaining in his body, but the constant gnawing sensation in his stomach made it impossible for him to rest, and thus, he found himself padding into the forest.

Hiccup pushed his way between the fronds of several ferns into a small clearing. Above him a gibbous moon floated serenely between silvery wisps of cloud. Without thinking, he tried to spread his wings; he barely managed to open them a couple inches before his muscles cramped and he let out a gasp of pain.

Twisting his head sideways, he squinted back at his shoulder. The rate his body healed astounded him; where there had been bloody teeth-marks a few days ago, now there was only a series of rough, circular depressions in his hide, covered with black, scaleless skin. Despite his amazement, his brief experience of flight had only emboldened the part of him that craved it, and his wing almost couldn’t heal fast enough.

Casting a final forlorn look skywards, Hiccup trudged onwards through the treeline and back into the forest. As he walked, a trickle of scent wound its way between the boughs. The odour triggered something in the back of his mind and he froze, front paw in mid air. His ear-fins stood straight up, twitching minutely at every sound around him; his nostrils dilated to bring in more air. He closed his eyes, blocking out his other senses and drew in a slow breath.

*Blood.*

Hiccup’s eyes shot open. Something bleeding had passed this way, and recently too. He lowered his head towards the ground and breathed in again. He spotted the faint cloven-hooved impression in the dirt a moment later, confirming what his nose told him; *deer*.

The scent of the animal drew on him, and as he turned to follow, it felt like his body already knew which way to go, as if he’d discovered a new cardinal direction - up, down, left, right, and *towards the scent*.

The sensation was eerily similar to his flight from the Night Fury. His senses were on overdrive,
picking up every twitch of the undergrowth in front of him and every rustle in the needles overhead. His whole body was tense, muscles moving in perfect harmony. His tail raised high in the air - to avoid disturbing the brush - waved slowly back and forth as he carefully placed his paw amongst the leaf-litter, all the while his heart pounded in his ears, marking time with it’s steady beat. However, unlike the panicked, desperate race between the sea stacks, Hiccup was perfectly, serenely calm as he moved between the trees, with nary the rustle of a disturbed leaf to announce his presence.

Hiccup followed fluidly from trace to trace; from a droplet of blood on the ground here, via a footprint on a patch of bare earth, to a handful of broken twigs on a bush there. He crouched lower, chest nearly brushing the ground as he slipped into a patch of ferns. Just a few feet in ahead of him, in a lush, grassed clearing a small herd of deer had bedded down for the night. The end of the trail lay at the edge of the herd; a young doe, her leg stretched out awkwardly beside her. In the moonlight Hiccup could make out the broken shaft of an arrow sticking out from the muscle. It seemed she had survived an encounter with his former clansmen.

The former human’s muscles tensed and his gaze focused on the the resting creature until everything else blurred into the background. He sprung, covering half the clearing in a single bound. The herd started at his sudden appearance and bolted, but he only had eyes for the doe. She staggered to her feet and managed a single step before he leapt again, bearing her to the ground. Instinctively his head came down, sinking his teeth into her neck, flooding his mouth with hot, fresh blood. The doe jerked once, twice, then stilled.

Hiccup let the carcass drop to the ground, panting softly. Had he just hunted and killed a deer with his bare hands?

No, part of him whispered, he’d done it with his teeth and claws.

Hiccup’s stomach growled and contracted painfully as he stared down at the body. He let himself lower his head to take a bite out of the deer’s soft underside, while his thoughts churned over what he’d just done. He wasn’t a fool; he’d seen animals butchered before, and he’d already accepted that as a dragon he ate his meat raw, but there was something different about being so personally, viscerally involved in the kill.

He shook his head slightly as he cracked a leg bone between his jaws; he was thinking about this all wrong. He’d never been particularly stealthy as a human, and it hadn’t been long before the village had stopped inviting him on hunting parties. Before, there had always been a part of him that felt ashamed that he couldn’t fully support himself in the village; now, he couldn’t deny a certain sense of primal satisfaction in the knowledge that the warm meat filling his belly was the product of his effort alone.

Finishing off the last of the deer, Hiccup set light to the remains and turned tail, wandering back through the woods towards the mountain at the centre of the island where he’d made his impromptu nest. Now that the shock had worn off, and with the pleasant feeling of a full stomach, he felt a lot calmer and more relaxed than when he’d entered the forest. After a few minutes’ of walking he realised why; he was no longer dependent upon Astrid for his next meal. For the moment, the Queen thought him dead, in a few more days he would be able to fly again, and now he could hunt.

The moon was edging towards the horizon by the time he reached the small cliffside overhang where he’d sheltered for the last few nights, and when he laid himself down on a patch of freshly fire-warmed rock, he was asleep within minutes.
Astrid heaved on the towering oak doors of the great hall until they creaked open far enough for her to stagger into the hall. She couldn’t find the energy to raise her head as she shuffled towards the back of the hall and waited for the cooks to serve her.

*Eel stew again?* she thought, with a hint of displeasure as a wooden bowl of grey-brown liquid landed on her tray. Truth be told, she was too exhausted to care; her body still ached from the battle, and she’d been working nearly non-stop for the last three days repairing and rebuilding houses destroyed by the dragons, and, judging by the number of blankets strewn around the edge of the hall, it would be at least another three before they were finished.

With a weary groan she sat down beside Ruffnut and Tuffnut, trying not to wrinkle her nose at the stench of sweat and dirt rolling of the twins’ bodies. The Thorstons’ house had been burnt to the ground in the fighting and, like her, they were still dressed in the tattered, soot-and-blood-stained clothes they’d been wearing at the time. The whole village was working overtime to get as much done as they could before winter set in, so nobody had found time to bathe.

Astrid took a spoonful of the eel broth, and followed it with a long draught of ale, setting her mug back down with a soft sigh.

“So,” Snotlout began in a subdued tone. “When do you think we’re going to have our next bout of dragon training?”

Astrid stared at him wordlessly; was he serious?!

“Oh, how about when we’re not all working ourselves to the bone trying not to die, numskull?!” Ruffnut shot back acidly.

“What would be the point?” Astrid added, “We’ve all already fought in our first battle and killed our first dragons; we’re already warriors.”

“It’s not actually that bad an idea,” Fishlegs put in. “We’re pretty low on morale right now, and having a class finish dragon training, with the top trainee kill the Nightmare in front of the village, would give everyone a positive event to rally around.”

“See,” Snotlout said, a hint of his former confidence in his voice. “I told you so.”

Tuffnut called his bluff. “You didn’t understand a word he said; I don’t think that was even Norse.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Astrid saw Fishlegs half-open his mouth to correct him, then obviously think better of it, and the table lapsed into silence.

Astrid’s thoughts drifted as she forced herself to eat the bland stew. Since she’d spoken with Hiccup and Stormfly three days ago, she’d only briefly spoken to Hiccup - a chance encounter with him one evening on the edge of the woods - just long enough for him to say he’d found a place to rest on the mountainside overlooking the forest, and for her to tell him about the ceremony Stoick was holding at the end of the week. Aside from that, she’d been too busy to even think about their plan.

“Do you ever wonder why they fight?” she asked quietly.

“Huh?” Tuffnut questioned, glancing up from his stew.

“The dragons,” she explained, heart suddenly pounding in her ears. “We’ve been here for seven generations and all we’ve done is fight. Any smart animal would have left years ago, so why haven’t they? What are they fighting for?”
“Because they’re evil!” Tuffnut spat.

“Monsters.” Ruffnut agreed vehemently. “If I ever find the dragon that burnt our house I’ll...” she trailed off with a growl and savage jerk of her spoon.

Astrid glanced at the bundle of shawls and blankets sat beside the long fire in the centre of the room. After Gothi, Iguna Thorston was one of the oldest women in the village; almost blind in one eye and in near-constant pain from her joints - spending the nights on the cold, hard floors of the draughty hall couldn’t be doing the aged widow any good.

“Fishlegs?” she asked, turning back to the table, “what do you think?” She couldn’t blame the Twins for hating Dragons at the moment, but surely the collector of dragon lore would be at least curious?

“I dunno, Astrid,” he replied with a shrug. “It’s just the way they are.”

Astrid’s fist tightened around her spoon, her knuckles turning white. They’re being forced to fight us you fools! Now that she’d been told the truth, it seemed blatantly obvious to her, but she couldn’t tell them, not yet. If she suddenly started ranting and raving about dragons, people were bound to start questioning her, then someone would inevitably figure out what she’d been doing outside the village for the last week, and she’d be locked up - or worse - inadvertently dooming them all. Plus, deep down, she knew that she had been much the same as them, and it had taken witnessing Hiccup’s transformation and Stormfly saving her life to change her mind; mere words wouldn’t convince her peers.

Deep in thought, Astrid barely noticed her friends gradually leave the table. She was still sat there when most of the lights in the hall had been extinguished or had sputtered and died. Her father stood behind her and rested a large hand on her shoulder.

“Things will get better, my girl” she thought, rising to her feet and making her way towards the pile of threadbare blankets in the corner of the hall where her family slept.

Berk was dark and quiet as Hiccup slipped between empty houses towards the cliffs. Being back in the village after two weeks as a wild dragon was a strange, almost dreamlike experience; everything was as he remembered it but also somehow wrong. Even in darkness, his Night Fury eyes could pick out details in the buildings around him he’d never noticed before, and alleyways that he had previously slipped through without a thought were now a tight fit for his bulk.

Worst of all was the smell - Gods above, it was overpowering! How had he not noticed before? What he could only describe as the stench of humanity was thick in the air, a cocktail of unwashed bodies and manure, mixed with a lingering odour of char and ash that had not faded in the days since the battle. The scent tickled something primitive in his mind, setting his instincts on edge and causing him to nearly jump out of his scales whenever a cooling timber creaked or a wounded warrior groaned in their bed.

Taking a shallow breath, he squeezed between the final pair of buildings and looked down on the survivors of Berk. Gathered on the docks below him, facing out to sea in a sombre crowd, was the remaining, able-bodied population.

As an apprentice blacksmith, Hiccup had spent enough time working with Ragnar Ingerman - the village shipwright - to know that it was a small miracle that the ship moored alongside the longest
pier was still floating. The longship’s hull was nearly blackened from bow to stern by overlapping scorch marks, and in several places it appeared that shields had been used to effect makeshift repairs. Worse, the lines of the ship were twisted askew, suggesting to him that the keel - the spine of the ship - had been damaged in the fighting. Repairing the vessel would have required them to near enough rebuild it from scratch, so instead the village had prepared her for one last voyage.

Stoick stepped onto the pier and turned to face the crowd. Hiccup’s ear-flaps twitched and he found he could make out his father’s words.

“People of Berk, we have gathered here tonight to remember those who were lost on the expedition into Helheim’s Gate, and those who fell defending their homes in our absence. While we may not have their bodies to venerate them properly in the eyes of the gods and our ancestors, we remember their names:

“Axel, son of Arnór; Björn, son of Björn...”

Stoick began to list the names of the dead whose bodies either lay at the bottom of the sea, or had been rendered into unrecognisable clumps of ash by dragonfire. On the final name, his voice faltered and, in a hushed, pain-ridden tone Hiccup had to strain to hear, he added “... and Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the third, my son.”

Stoick swayed on his feet, and Hiccup’s heart twisted painfully. He had to fight the urge to call out to his father, knowing that Stoick wouldn’t understand his voice, and that revealing his true fate would just cause his father more pain. It’s better this way, he told himself.

Gobber stepped forwards and rested his remaining hand on his friend’s shoulder, murmuring something Hiccup couldn’t make out. Stoick took a deep breath - as if he needed the pressure of the air in his lungs to hold him upright. “We will remember them in our songs and in our hearts, and, while we cannot perform the proper ceremonies, we make this gesture in the hope of appeasing their spirits.”

At their chieftain's words, a group of figures in dark cloaks moved down the pier and set about untying the longship from it’s moorings, while at the same time the front row of the crowd produced bows and arrows from under their own garments.

Gobber handed a weapon to Stoick as he began to speak the time-honoured phrases.

“May the Valkyries welcome you;
and lead you through Odin’s great battlefield.
May they sing your names with love and fury;
so that we may hear them rise from the depths of Valhalla;
and know that you have taken your rightful places at the table of kings.

“For great men have fallen; warriors, husbands, fathers ... sons .” As his words drifted out over frigid waves, the men on the pier unfurled the longship’s sails and pushed it out into the harbour, where the wind took it, gradually drawing the vessel out to sea.

A deep silence fell over the gathering as Stoick lit his arrow from a brazier beside him, nocked it, and drew the fletchings back to his chin. Hiccup thought he saw his father’s lips twitch in a muttered prayer before he released the string.

The burning projectile arced high before falling down at the centre of the deck, where the flames swiftly caught. Seeing their chief's shot land, the rest of the archers lit their arrows and pulled back, loosing a flurry of blazing arrows out over the ocean, ensuring the ship burnt well.
As the flames grew higher, lighting up the horizon, Stoick rejoined the crowd and other mourners began to step forwards to speak a few words about the dead. Hiccup paid them little mind, his gaze fixed on the burning ship. He stepped forwards until his forepaw rested on the very edge of the cliff. He slowly spread his wings, and felt only the barest twinge from where the Queen had punctured his flight muscles.

Feeling a grin tug at the corners of his mouth despite the circumstances, he gave his wings a slow, experimental flap, then held them out straight and pushed off from the edge.

He felt no fear as his paws left the stone and he dropped towards the rocks below. He let himself fall for a moment before he adjusted his tail and the air filled his wing membranes, gilding over the Vikings below with barely a whisper of wind to signal his passing.

Hiccup closed his eyes and drifted out to sea, luxuriating in the feeling of the air flowing over his body, gently ticking at his fins. Finally, after his panicked, first experience, and the tortuous week waiting for his wing to heal, he could truly enjoy flight.

His eyes snapped open. He had waited long enough. He pushed his tail upwards and simultaneously began to beat his wings. Within a few effortless breaths he was higher than the tallest peaks of Berk. An unconscious hum of pleasure rumbling in his chest, he allowed his wings to still as he pitched up further, gradually shedding speed.

For a moment, everything was silent and perfect; he hung weightless between the depths of the sky above and the midnight ocean below.

Then gravity won out and he overbalanced; he fell backwards towards the waves, his paws outstretched towards the gently twinkling stars. He began to chuckle as he flipped upright and pulled in his wings - leaving them slightly open to control his descent and prevent them whistling - and by the time he leveled out hundreds of feet below he was laughing uncontrollably, feeling happier and more carefree than he had since his transformation - since years before that too, if he was honest.

Still chuckling to himself, he flapped his wings and rose again, then twisted his tail and rolled into a wide spiral. For a time, he simply flew; climbing, diving, banking and rolling, his mind working overtime to come up with new ways to test his wings, and his body rising to the challenge every time.

Eventually, with a satisfying ache in his flight muscles - like the sting in his biceps after finishing a lengthy project in the forge - he found himself gliding in the wake of the burning longship, and his thoughts began to sober.

While, officially, the vessel slowly disintegrating upon the waves below was a tribute to all those who had died in the last weeks, Hiccup knew that in his father’s eyes, this was his funeral ship. Stoick would carry his grief for a long time - perhaps the rest of his life - but perversely, in a way, his ‘death’ was freeing for both of them.

For almost as long as he could remember, Hiccup had been a disappointment in his father’s gaze. Now, with him out of the way, Stoick was free to adopt Snotlout as his heir, and then perhaps the chief could temper the Jorgenson’s ego enough that he’d actually learn something.

It was a bittersweet feeling for Hiccup, realising that he was finally free from the shackles of his father’s expectations; for the first time in his life, he was free to choose what he wanted to do without facing Stoick’s disapproving glare. If, by some miraculous twist of fate, their plan worked and he was able to defeat the Queen, what next? He still had no idea if it was possible to turn back
human, and he was beginning to wonder if that was even what he wanted anymore. Being a dragon was unlike even his wildest dreams, and he had to admit, even after just two nights, the freedom of flight was dangerously addictive. If they were successful, Berk wouldn’t be hostile to dragons, so, perhaps, remaining a dragon wouldn’t mean completely abandoning everyone he’d ever known.

Hiccup grumbled and tossed his head, letting the wriggle pass backwards along his spine and tail. He was getting ahead of himself; he could still be killed by Vikings or the Queen tomorrow, he should enjoy a moment of freedom while he could.

Gazing down at the ship below, a thought struck him; there was still one thing he wanted to try. Craning his neck, he raised his tail and shot upwards, climbing near vertically. He hung for an instant at the peak of his ascent, fixing his gaze on the bright speck below. He dove, pressing his wings to his side for maximum speed, feeling them begin to vibrate as the wind rushed past. A heartbeat, and several hundred feet later, he cracked open his jaw. Air forced it’s way between his gums and heat blossomed in his chest. He held the dive. The heat grew and grew as he plummeted towards the ocean. At last, when it felt like there was a raging furnace between his ribs, and he could make out the individual planks of the burning deck, he released the shot and opened his wings.

The wind was so loud in Hiccup’s ears he barely heard the thunderous blast, but he felt the flash of heat all the same as he shot across the waves fast as the wind itself. By the time he slowed and circled around the ship was almost completely gone, reduced to a few chunks of charred wood bobbing up and down on the black waves. With a final orbit of the wreckage, he set his tail towards Berk and flew onwards.

Barely a few minutes into his flight, his ear-fins pricked up at the sound of a familiar chattering and whispering. On instinct, he flapped hard to gain altitude, then stilled his wings, gliding. In silent horror, he watched as a flock of dragons flew beneath him, oblivious to his presence.

Hiccup hardly dared to breathe as the flock flew by. The mixed group of dragons was smaller than the host which had destroyed Berk, but he still counted at least one of every common type of dragon - and a few of the rarer ones as well. He let out a soft sigh as the last dragon passed underneath him and he didn’t spot a certain, distinctive black silhouette. As the flock continued on, he noticed that many of the dragons appeared to be carrying things in their claws.

They’re taking their prey back to the nest after raiding one of the other islands, he realised, turning his course to follow after them.

I need to find out more about the Queen, he reasoned as he trailed the flock. To be victorious you must know your enemy as you do yourself; that sounded like something Astrid would say.

Soon enough, a great fog bank loomed on the horizon, the thick mists almost glowing in the moonlight; Hellheim’s Gate. On some unseen signal the flock wheeled as one and dove into the mists. Hiccup put on a burst of speed plunged in after them, barely managing to keep the last dragon in view.

Almost immediately, the open sea disappeared behind him, swallowed by the opaque mists. If not for the faint shadows in the fog ahead, and the constant chattering of the dragons as they flew, he would have been completely disorientated. The flock followed a twisting route, weaving this way and that, between sea stacks that lurked unseen in the mist, until he was almost on top of them.

This place is a maze, Hiccup thought, already lost; no wonder my dad never found the nest.

The chattering and whispering suddenly tripled in volume, reverberating around him, as if off the
mists themselves. Hiccup glanced around in alarm, spotting two groups of dragons emerging from the fog behind him. Fear clutched at his chest, but the dragons flew onwards single-mindedly, joining with the flock he followed, not noticing the stranger in their midst.

Hiccup slotted into a gap in the formation, eyes darting all around him, expecting to feel teeth and claws sink into his skin at any moment. Surrounded on all sides by dragons, navigating the fog was much easier; his head-frills would twitch in time with murmuring of the flock and they’d bank in that direction, avoiding a sea stack that loomed out of the mists a moment later.

Just as he thought that the fog was beginning to thin out, they crossed an invisible threshold and were suddenly flying over open sea, rapidly approaching a jagged peak jutting up from the waves, a small plume of smoke rising from it’s summit.

A chill went down Hiccup’s spine; he knew this island. *I offer you the gift of the Night Furies’ dominion*, the Fury had whispered in his dreams, *find me and I shall bequeath this to you.*

Hiccup shook his head - ear flaps slapping against his neck. *He shouldn’t be here.* He was flying into his enemy’s home unprepared and without a plan; *what was he thinking?*! He glanced around, but was surrounded by dragons on all sides; he couldn’t break away without drawing attention to himself.

Before he could formulate a plan, the flock dove, and he was forced to follow or crash into the Nightmare above him. Ahead, they were heading for a narrow crack in the mountainside. *There’s no way we’ll all fit through there!* Panicked, his eyes darted left and right, but he was still hemmed in. At the last moment, the dragons in the center of the formation slowed, while those on the outside swerved inwards, slotting into single-file seconds before they crashed into the mountainside

Hiccup was blind. He twisted. He turned, following the signals of the dragon in front of him on pure instinct. His frantic wingbeats cleared the rock walls by mere inches. All he could hear was the rushing of wind and the overlapping thunder of wings, reverberating endlessly in the tight passageway.

They burst out into a large chamber. Heat and motion assaulted his senses. There were dragons *everywhere*, all lit from below in a ruddy light. Sulphuric vapours stung in his nostrils and his eyes watered. Squinting, he saw a gap in the wall of bodies and dove for it, skidding to a stop on a small ledge near the top of the cavern, partially shielded by a natural pillar.

Heart pounding in his chest, Hiccup crept to the edge of the platform. Below him, the floor of the cavern was shrouded in thick, noxious-looking mist, lit from within by the omnipresent red light. Above, the combined flocks swirled in a tight spiral. One by one the dragons flew to the centre of the chamber and dropped their catch, then dove away, landing on walls and ledges around the perimeter of the chamber.

*It’s satisfying to know all our food has been dropped down a hole*, he thought, watching the body of a yak disappear into the mists.

In just a few minutes, all of the returning dragons had deposited their catch and the air was still. Everywhere Hiccup looked, he spotted more dragons; there must have been *hundreds* of them lining the walls of the nest, and gods know how many more in other caverns and tunnels below the mountain. *Where’s the Queen?* He thought. Scanning the various outcroppings and perches, he spotted several large dragons of unfamiliar species, but they all sat in the same position - head bowed, facing the mist-shrouded pit.
A low drone distracted Hiccup from his search; a lone, decrepit-looking Gronckle was hovering in the center of the chamber, its skin hanging off it in flaps. As he watched, its wings stilled for a moment and it dropped several feet before catching itself and labouring back up to its previous altitude. The Gronckle opened it’s mouth, coughing and gagging several times before eventually producing a single small fish. Unlike those before it, the dragon lingered in the air, scratching at a patch of flaking skin on its side.

A sudden hush fell over the chamber, the dragons around the walls pressing themselves tighter against the rock. Anxious, Hiccup glanced side to side.

With a roar like a collapsing cliff a monster shot out of the depths. For a moment, Hiccup was frozen, unable to comprehend the sheer size of the being before him. Then, with crack that made his ears ring, it’s jaws snapped shut around the unfortunate gronckle.

Hiccup jerked backwards, nearly tripping over his own tail. His first thought as the monstrous head disappeared back into the mists was that he’d stumbled into Jómungandr’s lair. Then he realised, and he wasn’t sure whether to scream hysterically or laugh like a madman. *That was the Queen?! Stormfly said they were big, but... that?! How in the names of Odin and all the Æsir and Vanir was he meant to kill that?!*

With a deep growl like the groaning of ice-sheets in the depths of winter, the Queen’s head poked up from the depths once more. Sheets of molten rock sloughed off her muzzle. Her nostrils opened, drawing in great clouds of mist.

*What do we have here?* Her every word was a stab of pain between his eyes. *You should be dead, Night Fury.*

A hundred pairs of slitted, reptilian eyes turned to glare at him. Hiccup didn’t wait around - in an instant, he gathered his strength and shot into the air, striving for the patch of daylight at the top of the cavern with everything he had. The whole nest took wing simultaneously, and a moment later he felt the blast of air as the Queen’s jaws slammed shut behind him.

The swarm of dragons pressed towards him as they shot towards the small circle of sky. He wasn’t sure if the dragons were trying to stop him, or simply fleeing from their enraged ruler in primal terror; either way his wings clashed painfully with several other dragons and at least one set of claws raked down his back in those few seconds of terrified upwards flight.

Hiccup burst out into daylight, immediately pulling in his wings and diving parallel to the mountain, desperately trying to pick up speed.

Dragons swarmed out of a vent on the mountainside below, and a familiar, terrifying sound sliced through the air. Hiccup wrenched his wings open, throwing himself into a turn moments before the Night Fury’s shot blew the rock beneath him into splinters.

Astrid’s words echoed in his mind; *If you get into a fight, your best chance is to end it quickly.* He knew he couldn’t escape while the Night Fury was in the air. With a grunt he flapped as hard as he could and pulled into a tight loop. At the top of his curve, he fired a shot at the black dragoness baring down on him, then breathed in sharply and fired again. The Night Fury twisted in mid air, slipping between his shots and streaking beneath him.

Hiccup folded his wings, spinning as he dropped. The wind nearly tore his wings from their sockets when he forced them open again, but now he was behind the Night Fury and he fired again. She darted away, and he twisted, wings and tailfins straining as he struggled to match her turn.
Tilting his head back, Hiccup could just make out the tip of her tail as he fought to stay with her, body screaming at him as they spiralled towards the ocean. The Fury could turn faster than him, and she began to gain on him as they chased each other around an invisible axis, but it wasn’t enough. As the water rushed towards them they broke away, wings beating in time with their heartbeats as they fought to regain altitude.

Hiccup’s muscles burned and his wounded shoulder began to ache again. In the corner of his eye he saw the Night Fury inch ahead. He growled and forced himself to push harder, but wingbeat by wingbeat, she pulled away. He had a shot, but his lungs could barely bring in enough air to fuel his exertions, let alone his fire.

He glanced in the other direction; the fog bank was only a few yards away, perhaps he could -

The fog beside him lit up, burning away as a Nightmare ignited itself, spewing fire into his path. Too close to evade, Hiccup flipped belly-up, coming to a dead stop in mid-air. Glancing back as he dove away, he saw the Nightmare hovering in place.

_The Queen’s playing with me_, he realised, a cold sense of dread settling in his stomach. _She knows I can’t win so all she has to do is keep me bottled up and wait._

Hiccup didn’t have any more time to think. A whistle cut through the air. He put his head down and flapped for his life, clawing for every scrap of speed his exhausted body could muster. The Fury’s diving screech cut off with a taut snap of her wing membranes, and he risked a glance behind him.

The slight deceleration nearly cost him his life. He glimpsed pink throat and blue light, and desperately threw himself sideways, feeling the scorching heat flash past him. He followed up with a wild series of maneuvers, desperately trying to shake his pursuer.

_It’s hopeless_, Hiccup thought. There was no way out, nothing he could use for a temporary advantage; no sea stacks he could dart between for a moment’s reprieve. He pushed on through the pain of burning muscles regardless, corkscrewing, looping and rolling as fast as he could, but eventually his exhausted wings and tail failed him. All it took was spending fractionally too long in a turn. There was a brief whistle, then a weight struck him from behind, sending him crashing onto the beach.

Gravel gouged at his chest, tearing off scales and spraying out around him as he skidded to a stop, the Night Fury perched atop him. “You are mine now, Night Fury,” she whispered with the Queen’s voice, her claws pressing lightly into his wing shoulders.

“**No!**” Hiccup thrashed beneath her futilely; his strength used up in his desperate flight.

The Queen’s roar shook the pebbles beneath him. **You ARE mine, Hiccup.**

His vision dimmed as he felt the Queen press down on his consciousness. Distantly, he was aware of a circle of dragons forming around him and the Night Fury.

“**Nnn-**”

_You belong to ME!!_

Red light.

Pain.
Nothing.

“Yes, my Alpha.”
Chapter 12: Power

Part 1: Ashes

The Night Fury raised his head from the claw-sharp stones, letting out a low, pained groan. He lay on a rough gravel beach, surrounded by a crowd of dragons of several species. He blinked; his mind felt fuzzy and thoughts seemed to slip through his claws. Where was he? Who were these dragons?

He blinked a second time, and suddenly it came to him: he stood on the shores of his nest, and the dragons surrounding him were his flock.

The Night Fury pushed himself to his feet, shaking bits of gravel and loose scales from his body. His flight muscles ached and he felt like he'd been dragged halfway across the beach on his chest. Again, memory eluded him; what happened to him?

“You crashed,” said a sibilant voice behind him. “You were flying close to the mountain when you hit an unstable air current. You hit the ground before you could react.”

The Night Fury turned around; behind him stood another of his kind, a female. He stared at her in shock. His distant memories knew her as the last of her kind; but if that was true, what did that make him?

Before he could figure it out, a voice not his own whispered in his thoughts.

Return to me, my flock.

Terror clutched at his chest. This was wrong, some part of him knew instinctively. But, as his gaze darted to the faces of his flock-mates he saw no fear in their eyes. Even while emotions warred within him, his wings spread and his legs drew into a take-off crouch; his body responding to his Alpha’s will.

Be calm, he told himself, the Queen protects and guides us, and in return we obey her. This is the way of the world, how things have always been.

The Night Fury shoved the thoughts to the back of his mind and took wing, the gravel skittering away beneath his hind paws as he pushed off. The rest of the dragons joined a moment later, forming a tight formation with the two Night Furies at the centre. They began to climb, spiralling around the mountain.

The Night Fury’s thoughts refused to be quietened completely as they flew. It wasn't always like this, was it? They seemed to whisper. There had been more of his kind once, hadn't there? And something else, something important about the Queen and Night Furies that escaped his memory.

Together, the flock banked and dove into a crack in the mountain. Darkness surrounded them on all sides. The Night Fury contorted the muscles in his throat and roared, but no sound came out. Instead, a vision burst into life behind his eyes. Like an instant frozen in time by the flash of a thunderstorm, he saw a smooth tunnel and the silhouette of the dragon in front painted in colourless light.
The feeling of uneasiness from earlier returned to the Night Fury, his sound-sight was as much a part of him as his regular sight; so why did it suddenly feel so unnatural?

Before he could think any further they turned the final corner into the nest proper. Utter, inescapable dread clutched at his chest. The female Night Fury let out a cry of alarm, narrowly avoiding a mid-air collision as he instinctively back-winged.

His gaze darted frantically around the nest, mere instinct keeping him hovering in place rather than plummeting through the mists below. Something terrible had happened to him here, he knew; but this was his home, wasn’t it? His instincts screamed at him to flee, but this was his nest, he was safe here, wasn’t he? Pain stabbed between his eyes.

Through blurred vision, he glimpsed a patch of empty stone beneath him and dove for it, landing with an ungraceful stumble. A blue-green Zippleback started at his sudden appearance, both heads rearing up in alarm.

“It is good to see you back in the nest,” one head hissed. “I trust you are uninjured?” the other continued.

“Yes,” he answered automatically. “No.” He winced as the pain in his forehead worsened. It felt like a red-hot sword blade was being driven slowly between his eyes. All he wanted to do was to lie his head down and sleep until the pain stopped, but his body refused to let him. His muscles tensed and his heart pounded like he’d just flown a mile at top speed. The more he thought about it, the worse the pain got.

“Ahh!” he cried out as the pain doubled. He dropped to the ground, pressing his forepaws to the sides of his head, desperately seeking some way to stop the pain. Half-remembered conversations floated just out of reach, their words indecipherable, like voices from a dream.

“What’s wrong?” “Where are you hurt?” It took him a moment to realise the voices were real; it was the Zippleback.

“I don’t. Know!” he ground out between locked jaws.

Through slitted eyes he saw one of the Zippleback’s heads half-open its mouth to respond, before the dragon suddenly turned to bow to the center of the nest. The pain faded marginally, allowing him to shakily stand as his Queen rose into view.

I am relieved to see you unharmed, my Night Fury, she told him. But you should rest now.

With a flick of his Alpha’s will, the pain vanished, and he felt his eyelids grow heavy. No! He thought; the voices in his head were clearer now! He knew that if he could just understand them, he...

The Queen fixed all six eyes on him. Sleep. Now.

The voices in his head became clear.

The nameless green Nadder, bleeding from a mortal wound in her chest - one he’d put there. “The Queen.. she uses dark magic to control dragons...”

Stormfly, her body shuddering as he cleaned her wounds. “The Queen’s control, it’s insidious. It doesn’t just take away your free will; over time it erodes your very identity... After a while, you start to question whether there was even a life before the Queen.”
The Night Fury gasped. He was Hiccup! He’d been human, until a week ago when the last Night Fury had turned him in a desperate act of rebellion.

You! Hiccup roared. She’d slaughtered the Night Furies and enslaved the dragons, forcing them to war against humanity. He whipped his head back and forth with a savage growl; he could rage at the Queen later, he needed to get out of here!

He spun, spreading his wings.

Stop.

Hiccup’s limbs turned to ice. NO! He shouted in his thoughts, straining, desperately willing his wings to flap, his legs to push him into the air. He remained rooted to the spot, as if his scales had fused to the stone.

Why must it always be this way with your kind, Night Fury? Why do you stubbornly cling to memories that only cause you pain?

The Queen didn’t give him the ability to reply.

That life is gone, Night Fury. You belong to me. Now, sleep.

A wave of lethargy flooded Hiccup. He clenched his jaws as hard as he could, digging his claws into the rock beneath him, clinging to consciousness with all his might. Despite his efforts, he felt his muscles relax one by one, and he slowly slumped to the stone beneath him. Last of all, his head grew heavier and heavier until it eventually came to rest on his forepaws.

His thoughts grew foggy as his eyelids began to droop.

Must not fall asleep. He told himself.

But he was so tired....

A quiet hush greeted Hiccup when he next woke. In the dim light seeping up through the mists, he could see every available surface in the cavern was filled with motionless shapes.

Beside him, the blue-green Zippleback from earlier had disappeared, replaced by a familiar black form. The Night Fury’s tail was curved around her body, tailfins shielding her head from his view.

Up close, he realised that the Night Fury wasn’t pure black like he’d first thought; her hide was dappled with a multitude of greys and blacks in swirling, unpredictable patterns. He also noticed that she was longer and thicker in the chest than he was; he wondered briefly whether his scrawniness as a human had somehow transferred over to his dragon body, or if Night Fury females were just naturally bigger.

Despite her increased bulk, the Night Fury was still sleek, sleeker than any of the other dragon’s he’d seen, lacking the horns and spikes that characterised so many of the northern species. The only protuberances that marred her sleek hide were a line of small fin-like spines that ran from behind her head down the center of her back.

Hiccup shuffled his wings, feeling a similar set of spines along his back. He shot to his feet, realisation surging through him; his thoughts were his own! The nest was asleep and the Queen was nowhere to be found!. A handful of stars hung in the night sky, visible through the crater far above. He spread his wings and -
His body froze.

No! Gods damn it! No! He willed his body to move. The only response was a stabbing pain between his eyes. He clenched his jaw, trying to focus through the agony. Seconds passed. His eyes watered. His muscles cramped. His lungs burned and his heartbeat faltered as the Queen’s power sucked the very life from him.

With an agonised gasp, Hiccup slumped to the ground, defeated. Blinking tears from his eyes, he looked over at the Night Fury, still lying silently beside him. He remembered how he’d first seen her, tied up by his bola launcher, what felt like a lifetime ago.

“The Queen’s flock descended on the Furies’ homeland,” Stormfly had told him, “massacring every dragon they encountered.

“All, save for one; barely more than a fledgling at the time, she was taken by the Flock and dragged before their master. The Queen broke that young Fury’s mind, enslaving her and using her as a spy to root out the Furies that had escaped the destruction of their home.”

How long had the Fury spent like this, trapped in her own body? How many horrors had she been forced to witness? He wondered how she had felt when he stood over her, knife in hand. Angry? Sorrowful?

Or relieved?

Seconds later, she had him beneath her claws, moments away from ending his life.

“What did you see in me in that moment?” he asked in a whisper. “What made you spend your only hope of freedom on me?”

The Night Fury gave no indication she was even aware of his presence.

Awaken.

In an instant, the nest went from near-silence to a thunderstorm of rushing wings. The Night Fury beside him stirred and leapt into the air in a single motion. He felt his wings spread against his will as he followed her into the whirling maelstrom of dragons spiralling upwards towards the crater. In a few seconds, the entire flock was outside, forming an unbroken ring around the peak of the nest. With a chill, Hiccup realised what was happening.

Please don’t be Berk. he prayed. Please don’t be Berk.


An image of a pair of islands - lights blazing defiantly against the dark - appeared in his mind. A wave of relief rushed through him, immediately followed by sickening guilt. Berk would be spared, but another Viking tribe would feel the burn of Dragonfire instead, and he-

Oh gods, no.

The image of the green Nadder’s blasted-open torso flashed before his eyes. He would be forced to turn his fires on his kinsmen.

Please no, he begged in his thoughts. I’ll hunt for you, whatever you want, anything but this.

If the Queen heard his pleas, she didn’t respond. His tail twisted and he turned sharply, breaking
the circle.

As quick as the flock had gathered, it dispersed. Hiccup found himself at the head of about a quarter of the gathered dragons, the Night Fury flying alongside him. As they wheeled around, towards the fog bank, he glimpsed several sharp ‘V’s of dragons flying in different directions.

In darkness, the fog seemed even thicker. Guided by The Queen, the flock weaved between invisible sea stacks - their passing marked only by the changing sound of their wing-beats. Hiccup focused on the fire-source in his chest, trying to draw power from it as he had when he first broke free from the Queen’s control. However, instead of the tightly-bound well of heat, he felt only a cold, solid lump.

_It’s hopeless_, he thought. He wasn’t a Night Fury. The black dragon flying beside him knew infinitely more about the situation than him, and she’d still fallen to the Queen. Who was he - the ghost of a useless boy trapped in a body that no longer belonged to him - to think he stood any chance?

In the space of a wingbeat they passed out of the fog into clear air overflying moonlit ocean. Twin islands loomed on the horizon ahead, split - as if by some almighty axe - by a narrow sea with sheer cliffs on either side,

Hiccup had heard descriptions of the distinctive straight between the two islands. The locals called it ‘The Slice of Death’, for this was _Dökkhöfn_ , home of the Meathead tribe.

_I’ve failed_, he thought. _Just like every time I try to do something good._

A cloud drifted across the moon, extinguishing its light as the boy-turned-Night-Fury glided towards the human village of _Dökkhöfn_ on silent wings. As he drew closer, he could make out the shapes of night watchmen making their rounds; they carried no lights to preserve their night vision, but their efforts were in vain. Hiccup knew he was invisible, a black shadow against the midnight sky.

With a barely audible whisper of wind the Night Fury beside him veered away and began to climb. The pace of his own wingbeats increased as he matched her ascent, leaving the flock behind.

Hiccup wished he could look away as his wings carried him above the cliffs and over the oblivious village. Like Berk, the Meatheads used catapult towers to assist their defence, however they built their towers from dense hardwood, so that when they were inevitably brought down by a dragon, they could be repaired much faster than Berk’s stone emplacements.

_The cliffside catapults. Bring them down._

Six towers in total stood watch over _Dökkhöfn_, two of which guarded the dragons’ approach. Hiccup’s tail twisted, turning him towards the southernmost fortification. His wings beat a final stroke, pushing him upwards slightly, then folded against his back. His jaws parted, pulling in air as his fire source opened. In the corner of his eye he caught a flicker of blue light - like a faint falling star - as the Night Fury began her attack, then his eyes turned downwards as he began to fall. The wind roared, tugging at the tips of his wings, trying to pull them open. That all-too-familiar screech began to build. Below, the watchmen cried the words every Viking dreaded.

“Night Fury! Get down!”

Hiccup fired. His shot struck the base of one of the tower’s supports, shattering the thick tree-trunk and blasting a crater half a man’s height into the ground. For a moment it seemed the tower would
stand on three legs. Then, with a series of echoing retorts, and a spray of splinters to rival a Nadder’s spine-shot, the remaining supports snapped, and ever so slowly, the structure began to lean.

The Vikings manning the catapult screamed and leapt for safety, falling past Hiccup as he sped over the waking village. In a blur, he saw half-dressed warriors stumbling out of homes, and panicked mothers hurrying their children to safety.

The tower hit the ground in a deafening crash, and the clouds above lit orange as the flock descended in waves of teeth and fire. Hiccup’s tail twisted, turning him back towards the cliffs. As he climbed, he saw the Queen’s strategy unfold in all its brutal efficiency. The first wave of dragons landed on the cliffside, and the hastily assembled defenders rushed forwards with a furious shout. The second wave landed in the space they cleared. The war cries of the defenders turned to screams as dragons crashed into the back of their line. Finally, the third wave of dragons descended on the undefended edge of the village.

Over the din of battle, Hiccup heard a thump of wood on wood, followed by whistle as a hail of rocks flew through the air. Below him, a Zippleback leapt into flight, gas trailing behind it. He was close enough to hear the snaps as the missiles struck, shattering its wings.

Hiccup turned sharply. His wings pulled in as another tower came into view. The Vikings manning it were busy winching down the arm for another shot, by the time they heard his whistling dive it was too late. For an instant, he saw the panicked eyes of the defenders illuminated in electric blue. Then his shot struck. As he flew overhead he heard an agonised scream cut off by a grizzly crunch. When he turned around, he saw the half-blackened bodies lying on the ground beside the tower.

He felt sick. He wanted to throw up, but the Queen wouldn’t allow him.

In the distance Hiccup heard a boom, then a crash as the Night Fury felled another tower. Acrid smoke filled his nostrils as he passed over the front line The attack had started mere minutes ago, and already the Meatheads had lost two-thirds of their defences and been driven back halfway to the center of the village.

“The Towers!” A deep, booming voice rang out. “They’re hitting the catapults!”

Below, several Vikings broke away and began to sprint across the village. Hiccup’s wings beat harder, his gaze fixed on the remaining towers. Some dragons had already made it to the far side of the village, and several houses were ablaze. Hiccup’s wings pulled in and he fell in a shallow dive towards the emplacement’s base.

At that moment, the roof of a burning house finally caved in. With a roar, flames leapt skywards, painting the ground in orange light. A shock of fear shot through him. He was exposed.

“There!” The voice boomed. “I see the devil! Get me a spear!”

The ground rushed towards Hiccup. His torso muscles tensed. A popping sensation sped down his spine. His wings shot out and he turned. His back bent further than he thought possible, folding himself nearly in two. In the blink of an eye, he was flying the other direction. A knot of men stood in the street before him; a tall man at the center hefted a spear. Flames blazed within Hiccup’s chest. He unleashed his fire.

The shot struck at point-blank range. Hiccup was thrown several feet straight up. His wings were slack for a moment, and it was only the Queen’s control that kept him from falling out of the sky. He blinked several times as he ascended, a yellow-green afterimage of the explosion lingering in
his vision. Distantly, he heard a second peal of thunder as the final tower fell, but above the screams and roars a single choked cry rang in Hiccup’s ears.

“Dad! No!”

*Dear Odin, no...*

The son of the chief had barely seemed to notice his existence when they’d met at the last *þing* - but Hiccup recognised his voice. As he banked over the village, his gaze passed over Thuggory kneeling in the street - his mind refused to process what his fire had done to Mogadon the Meathead.

He wanted to scream, to cry, to vomit, rage against The Queen, something, *anything*. But he couldn’t. All he could do was look on with numb detachment as a pair of warriors dragged the boy away from the remains of his father.

The Queen turned him away, towards where the fighting was heavier. The Meatheads had been pushed almost to the center of the village. Below him, a Gronckle had been backed up against a wall. His wings closed. The humans fell. A whistle cut through the air as the Night Fury turned her fires on the men below.

By the time he’d climbed back up to altitude, the defenders had fallen back to the central square of their village. This time, the Night Fury struck. Her shot hit the center of the line, throwing bodies to either side and scattering the rest. The flock washed over the square in a wave of fire.

Hiccup couldn’t bring himself to count how many times he dived on *Dökkhöfn* that night. He could only watch despondently as the dwindling defenders were pushed house by house to the far side of the village - towards the body of their chief. Every time the Meatheads tried to rally, to push the invaders back, he or the Night Fury would fall upon them, sending them running with a flash of blue fire.

The moment each of the Meatheads learned of Mogadon’s death was so clear Hiccup could almost hear the murmurs passed through their ranks; In a matter of moments, their pose would change from defiant anger to reluctant acceptance, and then their fists would tighten on their weapons as they resolved to take as many dragons down with them as they could.

The Meatheads made their stand at the foot of the tower he’d nearly destroyed - around the remains of their fallen chief. He could see the despair clear in the upturned eyes of the warriors; they were already all but defeated.

*Break them,* The Queen whispered in his mind.

The Night Fury and he dived as one. A dreadful harmony built as twin screeches sliced through the night. They fired; a pair of blue shooting stars falling to earth. A *woosh* of air as the Night Fury passed above him, then *boom* as their shots struck. Their blasts hit just in front of the line. Nearby, men were thrown to the ground, and further away they cursed and ducked beneath shields as shards of broken cobbles rained down.

The line broke. Vikings screamed and ran - some dropping their weapons in their haste to escape. Agonised cries split the air as the flock fell upon the fleeing men.

Blood ran in the streets of *Dökkhöfn*.

In the space of a few minutes the only living inhabitants of the village were dragons - the defenders either having made it to the bridges over the Slice of Death and the safety of the northern isle, or
been dragged down by the flock.

Hiccup’s wing beats slowed, and, as he and the Night Fury circled almost lazily above the deserted village, his heart froze into a block of ice. He couldn’t say how long the battle had lasted. He felt like an ant asked to describe a mountain; he simply couldn’t comprehend the scale of what had happened, what he’d done. With all his might, he wished that it was a dream - that any moment he would wake up back in the cove, but deep down, he knew that it was all terribly, horrifically real.

Below him, the flock systematically broke open every storehouse the Meatheads had built and plundered the hard-earned food stocks within. Occasionally, screams and desperate cries for help rang out as the dragons discovered Vikings hidden within their homes. They were quickly silenced.

When the first light of dawn touched the eastern horizon and the flock took flight, all that remained of Dökkhöfn was a smouldering ruin.

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**Part 2: Rise**

Only the gentle lapping of the waves against the dock could be heard as the lone ship approached Berk’s harbour. In the distance, a blue-white iceberg drifted on the tide. Astrid knew the ship was trouble even before she saw the scorched hull and smoke-darkened sail - No sane Viking would sail this late in the season without good reason.

A lonely gull cawed, hovering on the winds above her. She looked up; the bird was a black silhouette against the pale grey sky.

*Where are you, Hiccup?*

She’d finally managed to slip away into the forest earlier, only to find Hiccup’s cove abandoned. She’d searched as long as she dared, but found no trace of the boy-turned-dragon. *He’s probably fine,* she reasoned, *he wouldn’t hide somewhere easy to stumble upon.* However, a niggling feeling in her gut told her that something was wrong. That feeling had only gotten stronger since she spotted the approaching ship.

The thump of heavy footsteps on boards shook her from her thoughts. Stoick shoved his way, through the silently gathered crowd onto the pier, followed closely by Gobber.

“What are ‘yer all lookin’ at?” The smith bellowed. “Get back t’ work!”

Astrid grunted, hefting a barrel of freshly salted and preserved fish. She shouldered her way through the gradually dispersing crowd, making her way towards the ramps that lead up the cliffs. After the battle, a nervous, almost fearful atmosphere had settled over the village; whenever anyone stepped outside, they would cast an anxious glance at the sky, as if they expected the dragons to return any moment to finish them off. The appearance of the ship had only heightened the Berkians’ fear, and as she climbed, she saw much of the crowd still lingered, busying themselves around the docks, all the while casting surreptitious glances out to sea.

By the time she made it back to the water level, the blackened vessel was pulling up alongside the pier. A group of dockhands jumped aboard, ropes in hand, and helped the lone crewman secure the vessel. After several seconds of rummaging amongst the crates and baskets piled haphazardly on the deck, the gangplank was found and lowered into position.

Astrid frowned, no self-respecting sailor would carry that much cargo unsecured on deck. *Aside from...*
Stoick squinted at the disheveled-looking man who disembarked from the ship. “Johann?”

“Ahh Stoick!” The trader croaked, then broke into a coughing fit.

“Someone fetch this man some water!” Stoick ordered.

“Yes chief!” Astrid barked, rushing to a nearby barrel of freshwater kept for the dockworkers. She dunked a chipped wooden cup beneath the surface and hurried back, handing the still dripping cup to Johann. The trader drank deeply, and let out a haggard sigh.

“Ahh, thank you, Miss Astrid.” He clasped her hand briefly, then addressed the chief. “I must apologize for my manners, Stoick. I confess that I had to leave my previous port in somewhat of a hurry, and didn’t have time to properly provision for the trip. So, regrettably, I...”

Stoick cut him off. “You’re always welcome on Berk, Johann, but we thought you were spending winter with the Meatheads this year.” The chief’s gaze drifted to scorched timbers of Johann’s ship. “What happened?”

The trader’s usual personable persona cracked, and a haunted expression crossed his face. “Dragons...” he whispered.

“You’ll have to speak up,” Gobber cut in, “Me ears aren’t as good as they used t’ be - all the ‘ammerin’ you know.”

Johann shuddered, his hands clenching on the cup tight enough to turn his knuckles white. “Dragons,” he began, “A raid unlike anything I’ve seen in all my years in the north. They came in the night, a huge swarm of the beasts, large enough to blot out the sky! Call me a coward, but when I heard the screams and saw the flames, I knew I had to leave. I barely made it out with my life; seconds after I left, the entire harbour became a firestorm.”

“What about the Meatheads?” Stoick’s tone was deadly.

Johan gulped. “Dökkhöfn is ... gone.”

Stoick took a step forwards, his face thunderous. “What do you mean, ‘gone’?”

“I saw it all from my ship,” Johann replied, “I saw the Meatheads flee across the Slice of Death, and then the dragons, they burned the village to the ground, the women and children still trapped inside...” The trader’s face was pale and shone with a faint slick of sweat.

“This better not be another of your stories, Johann,” The chief growled.

“Aye!” Gobber agreed, gesturing with his hook. “We’ve had our own problems with dragons lately, but the Meatheads are strong, they wouldn’t go out without a fight.”

“That’s not the worst part of it sirs,” Johann continued, “As I sailed away, when I thought at last I was safe, out of the darkness came not one, but two Night Furies!”

Astrid failed to stifle a gasp of shock. “Two Night Furies?” She demanded, stepping forwards, heedless of the chief’s presence - she had to know. “Are you sure? Did you get a clear look?”

Johann met her stare with wide, frightened eyes. “I’m certain. Every time I close my eyes, I hear that sound - that awful screech, doubled in terrible harmony. I’ll remember it to the day I die.”

Astrid staggered back. Explanations whirled through her mind; Night Furies were almost invisible
in the dark, Johann must have misinterpreted what he saw, or, perhaps the Queen had another Night Fury hidden away somewhere. But, In her heart, she already knew what had happened.

No, she thought, He wouldn’t...

“Ahem,” Gobber coughed.

Astrid looked up. Johann and the chief looked at her expectantly. “I- I have to go” she stammered, spinning around and pushing her way through the crowd of stunned Vikings.

Astrid pelted up the ramps, boards thudding beneath her feet. When she reached the top, she kept going, running through the eerily quiet streets. She threw open the back door of her house, grabbed a bundle of spare rope and sailcloth and darted out again. Her heart was pounding frantically in her chest when she reached the arena - and not just because she’d sprinted halfway across the island. With a quick glance over her shoulder, she threw open the gate and hurried across the ring to Stormfly’s cage.

The Nadder burst out of the doors. She brushed passed her, and stopping in the middle of the ring, tail-spines erect and wings half-open. Stormfly’s head darted side to side, her gaze sweeping the arena several times before eventually coming to rest on her. The dragon took a step forwards, nostrils dilating as she scented the air.

Astrid eagerly stepped forwards, reaching for her muzzle, only for Stormfly to snort and hop backwards, jerking her head out of reach. Astrid yanker her hand back, as if she’d been burned. “What’s gotten into you, girl?” she whispered, half to herself.

Stormfly sniffed at her again, then raised her head sharply, eyeing the empty stands as if expecting a horde of warriors to jump out.

Astrid blinked, suddenly realising; The Nadder had probably been able to sense her distress from the moment she stepped into the arena.

Taking a deep breath, she slowly extended her hand. “I’m okay, girl,” she said softly, watching the Nadder’s pupils widen as she calmed down, lowering her head to press her muzzle into the outstretched palm. She took a second, shallower breath, not wanting to spoil the moment.

“But I think something has happened to Hiccup.”

Stormfly’s pupils narrowed in alarm, and she let out a small whimper. Even on a dragon’s alien features, Astrid knew the emotions going through her; she’d felt them herself after her uncle’s departure, and she’d seen them too often recently on the faces of the surviving Berkians.

“A ship arrived in the harbour earlier,” Astrid answered, “It belonged to a trader who escaped a village being destroyed by dragons. He said that he saw two Night Furies in the attack, and I haven’t seen Hiccup in a few days...

“I think the Queen has him.”

Stormfly’s wings and tail drooped, and she let out a small whimper. Even on a dragon’s alien features, Astrid knew the emotions going through her; she’d felt them herself after her uncle’s departure, and she’d seen them too often recently on the faces of the surviving Berkians.

“We can’t lose hope, Stormfly,” she began softly, stepping in close. The Nadder tried to pull away, but this time she followed, reaching up to rest a supportive hand on her neck. “My Uncle once told me that there are moments in life when we are knocked down, and we have two choices; we can either roll over and admit defeat, or we can grit our teeth, get back up and fight.
“Hiccup is the last hope for both our peoples, and, right now, he needs help. I can’t reach him alone, Stormfly; will you help me?”

Stormfly looked up at her for a long moment. The Nadder’s great golden eyes blinked once, then she stood up to her full height and tossed her head back with a short chirp; a gesture that clearly meant ‘get on’.

“Thank you,” Astrid breathed, picking up the sailcloth she’d brought.

“To help me hold on, and make me a little more comfortable,” she answered Stormfly’s confused look, then threw the cloth over the Nadder’s back.

Stormfly squawked in alarm, but quickly settled down and allowed her to continue. She looped the rope around the Nadder’s body a few times - in front and behind her legs - securing the cloth in place, then tied the ends off with a knot beneath Stormfly’s torso.

Astrid stepped back a moment, examining her handiwork, before swinging onto the Nadder’s back, into her makeshift saddle. As soon as she was in position, Stormfly reared up - drawing a startled cry from Astrid - and beat her wings as hard as she could. As the momentary panic subsided, she realised what Stormfly was doing. Unclenching her hands from around the Nadder’s neck, she tugged on the ropes holding the cloth in place.

Satisfied that her knots would hold - and that the rope wouldn’t impede Stormfly’s flight - she nodded to the Nadder.

“Let’s go.”

Stormfly chirped and began to move across the arena, quickly picking up speed. Astrid ducked, tightening her grip on the dragon beneath her, as they passed beneath the gates. As soon as they were clear, Stormfly’s wings shot out. A stride later they were in the air.

Stormfly’s wings extended on either side in great blue and yellow sails. Her breath caught in her throat, and she wished she had time to revel in the feeling of flight. Instead, she crouched closer to the Nadder’s neck, focusing on her task.

“Let’s do this, girl,” she whispered. “Find Hiccup.”

Astrid shivered, rubbing at the skin of her exposed arms. What had begun as a perfectly bearable temperature over Berk’s forest had dropped sharply as they widened their search, spiralling out over open ocean, made worse by the constant biting wind, robbing heat from her extremities.

Ahead, the steel-grey sky appeared to have taken a chunk out of the otherwise smooth horizon. It took several seconds to realise what she was looking at: Helheim’s Gate, the mysterious fog-shrouded island that supposedly held the Dragons’ nest.

Astrid felt a chill go down her spine - one that had nothing to do with the temperature. “I have a bad feeling about this Stormfly,” she began. “We should-”

Stormfly lurched beneath her, dropping several yards straight down.

“Stormfly!” Astrid cried, clutching tightly at the Nadder’s neck. “What are you doing?!”

The Nadder didn’t respond, turning sharply and accelerating towards the fog bank.
The mists seemed almost like a solid object as they hurtled towards them. Astrid couldn’t stop herself taking a gasp of air as they plowed headlong into them. The sound of the waves became muffled, and they were suddenly surrounded by an echoing, chattering call. Astrid was uncomfortably reminded just how little Vikings actually knew about dragons. She felt vibration beneath her as Stormfly trilled in response, and draconic shadows appeared around them.

Astrid instinctively pressed herself against Stormfly’s back as she swerved suddenly - avoiding some unseen obstacle or following a silent call, she wasn’t sure. She turned her head from side to side, trying to keep track of the dragons around them, but the bodies were impossible to follow in the swirling mists. As she did, she noticed shapes hanging beneath the draconic silhouettes. They’re hauling in their kill, she realised. What does that make me?

“Come on Stormfly,” she whispered, leaning to the side to speak into the dragon’s ear, “We need to get out of here.”

Stormfly grunted and tossed her head, forcing Astrid to pull back. She barely stifled a cry of shock as the Nadder dropped beneath her. As she clung to her ropes for dear life, she glimpsed flashes of towering sea stacks and a sharply-peaked mountain, before they plunged into a pitch-black cavern. Stormfly banked and rolled, following some unseen path.

Astrid’s stomach flipped. “Don’t throw up, don’t throw up,” she whispered to herself, squeezing her eyes shut and hanging on with all her might.

Eventually, the interminable spinning and banking ended, and she felt a wave of hot, sulfur-laden air rush over her, before they landed roughly and she was unceremoniously dumped on the ground. She lay there for a moment, waiting for the world to stop spinning, then flipped over onto her front.

A cry of fear escaped her lips, as her hand landed on open space. Her eyes shot open, and she looked down onto mists lit by the fires of Muspelheim. She scrambled back from the edge, then took several deep breaths and slowly got to her feet. Dragons covered every available surface of the massive cavern, some even clinging to cracks in the near-vertical walls. Despite hundreds of fire-breathing reptiles filling the space, there was a strange hush, quiet enough for her to hear the occasional pop and burble from the mists below.

“What Stoick wouldn’t give to find this place...” she whispered.

Then it hit her: This was the nest; she was a human in the dragons’ nest.

I shouldn’t be here.

She spun around. Stormfly was crouched, wings mantled, her head nearly touching the stone floor. Her pupils were narrow black slits.

“Stormfly,” she breathed, “We really need to get out of here.”

No response. She took a step closer.

“Girl? Can you hear me?”

She waved her hand in front of Stormfly’s muzzle. The Nadder didn’t even blink.

Astrid felt a pang in her chest; This was her fault.

She grit her teeth, pushing the thought away. She could blame herself later, right now, she needed
to focus. She scanned the rock wall and nearby ledges; there had to be a way out of this.

Her gaze swept over the lower ledges. She gasped, and had to stop herself instinctively calling out. On a ledge below them, two unmistakeable black dragons lay side by side. The larger one appeared to be asleep; the smaller one was awake, eyes slitted as he stared into the pit.

*It's true,* she thought. *The Queen has him.*

Astrid eyed the section of rock wall between them, it was maybe, barely, climbable. She glanced back at Stormfly, still crouched in the same position.

“I’m sorry, girl,” she whispered. Stormfly would understand why she had to try and save Hiccup. Right?

The rock gave way as soon as she put her weight on it, unleashing an avalanche of small stones. Her heart skipped a beat as the stones clattered down the rock face. The sound was deafening in the unnatural hush that ruled the nest.

A low growl broke the silence. On an adjacent ledge, a deep purple Monstrous Nightmare slowly raised its head. Its amber eyes fixed her with a piercing stare.

Astrid backed away, fingers instinctively clenching, wishing she still had *Sandraudiga.* A flicker of motion caught her eye. Her gaze darted upwards. A Terrible Terror crawled down the rock towards her. Above, the twin heads of a Zippleback peered over the ledge.

Her back hit something solid. She couldn’t stop the terrified whimper that escaped her. She dared a glance behind. She was up against Stormfly’s flank. The Nadder still didn’t react.

“Stormfly,” she begged. “You said you came back to protect me. I need your help now, *please.*”

Nothing.

A furious hiss sounded behind her. She turned to face the oncoming dragons. Behind the Nightmare, more dragons prowled across the ledges.

*So this is it,* she thought, reaching down to her belt. Her fist clenched on the hilt of her knife.

“Here I am, ungodly beasts, Fearless Astrid Hofferson!”

The Terror leapt. She stepped inside. She slashed at its exposed belly with one hand, pushing it past her with the other. Hot blood slicked her right arm. The Nightmare twitched. She dove, darting behind Stormfly as liquid fire splashed where she’d stood. The Nadder flinched as burning droplets landed on her outstretched wings.

A deep growl rumbled behind her. Astrid spun, a second, crimson, Nightmare loomed on the other side. She looked up at Stormfly, beseeching. The Nadder blinked. She saw green light reflected in wide black pupils.

A moment stretched into eternity.

For that impossible instant, Astrid was transfixed by Stormfly’s stare. Despite the heart pounding in her chest, and the adrenaline burning in her veins, she felt perfectly calm, a sense of understanding blooming within her. In Stormfly’s eyes she could see the fear and confusion as she woke up from the Queen’s control, and beneath that, burning anger at the Queen for causing her dam’s death, and deeper still, underlying it all, unbreakable determination to share her knowledge
and fulfil the Songkeepers’ promise. In that breath, the emotions were so clear, so real, she could almost feel them herself.

Then she blinked, and it was over.

Stormfly exploded into motion. She surged forwards, leaping into the air, and simultaneously snatching Astrid by the scruff of her tunic. As soon as her legs touched her dragon’s back, she grabbed hold, wrapping her arms around Stormfly’s neck as they shot towards the mountain’s peak. Ahead of them was open sky, and a rent in the clouds, through which shone a shimmering sheet of green light.

The cavern was filled with the thunder of rushing wings as the very walls seemed to come to life, dragons leaping into the air all around them. A titanic roar shook the mountain. Astrid looked back, straight into an enormous, gaping maw. It took a heartbeat for her to process the massive dragon it was attached to.

“Great Odin’s ghost...” she breathed.

A shadow fell over them as the vast jaws loomed closer. They weren’t going to make it. Stormfly growled, and they shot forwards. The Queen’s maw slammed shut mere inches beyond Stormfly’s tail. A deafening crash and rush of air nearly tore Astrid from the saddle. She turned forwards, hugging herself tightly to Stormfly’s back.

Dragons swarmed the opening above them, blotting out the sky. They were too slow.

“Stormfly!” Astrid gasped.

Her Nadder squawked in defiance, flipping over and diving back past the massive dragon’s head. Astrid felt muscles beneath her flex as Stormfly lashed her tail, heard the whistle of spines flying through the air, and the roars as they found their marks in the pursuing flock.

Stormfly’s wings snapped open and suddenly they were flying level. Astrid glimpsed the black maw of the tunnel they used before, then the darkness swallowed them. Astrid threw her weight to the side as Stormfly banked sharply, then back the other way as they zig-zagged through the tunnel. Her senses were on overdrive, hypersensitive to every twitch of her Nadder - when instinct told her to move, she didn’t have time to think. The snarls and roars of the flock echoed behind them, but Astrid felt a strange sense of calm creep over her as they twisted and turned beneath the mountain; she felt like she could almost preempt Stormfly’s movements - she would shift her weight at the exact moment they started to turn.

She was so focused on their flight, she almost didn’t notice her surroundings weren’t completely dark. In front of her, she could see Stormfly’s head outlined in blue-green light. The glow had no obvious source; it almost seemed to come from within the Nadder herself.

They turned a final corner and burst out into green-tinged daylight. Astrid pressed herself as tight as she could against Stormfly’s back, tucking her head into the crook of her arm to protect herself from the blinding wind as they accelerated over open water.

They had nearly reached the fog bank when over the roaring wind and dragons she heard a sound that caused fear to clutch at her chest:

The rising whistle of a diving Night Fury.

Intruders! Fly! Defend!
Hiccup's body lurched into the air, yanking his thoughts from a pit of self-pity and despair. The Night Fury climbed near-vertically beside him. The Queen’s head burst out of the mists, as a blue blur plummeted past her. The whole mountain reverberated with the Queen’s roar and the cacophony of a hundred dragons taking wing.

Then, silence as they shot out of the mountain’s peak into still evening air, lit green by aurorae shining through the clouds. His wings slowed, circling the peak as the rest of the flock joined them, drowning out the lapping of the waves below with a hubbub of agitated growls and squawks. He felt a tingling sensation down his spine; the land below looked surreal and flat, lit by the fading daylight and diffuse glow of the aurorae.

A blue shape shot out of a rent in the mountainside. He dove, leaving the rest of the flock behind. At the same time, more dragons erupted from the nest below. It took a moment for him to recognise the speck he hurtled towards as a Nadder - something was off about the dragon’s silhouette. As the sea rushed towards him, the lump on the dragon’s back resolved into a terrified blonde Viking.

No... Hiccup wanted to cry. Not them too...

Hiccup’s wings opened. He heard the taught snap as the Night Fury did the same. Twin ‘V’s of water flew upwards in their wake. Twenty yards separated them from Stormfly. The wind whistled past his ears as his flight muscles strained, pushing him faster than he’d ever flown before. The gap began to close.

Hiccup wished he could close his eyes. Stormfly herself had told him Night Furies were the fastest fliers of all dragons.

Astrid glanced behind her, then shouted something to her mount - her words whipped away by the wind. Stormfly’s scales seemed to catch the light, and then she was pulling away. Hiccup felt an echo of the Queen’s disbelief in his mind. He blinked; the Nadder’s scales weren’t reflecting the light - she was glowing!

Astrid and Stormfly plunged into the mists. Hiccup’s muscles burned as the Queen forced him even faster, his tail twisting to follow the eddies left in their wake.

Again, Hiccup found himself darting through a maze of sea-stacks in a desperate chase. The strange glow coming from Stormfly’s scales was clearer now, shining off the mists and giving the Nadder a blue-green halo.

A stone monolith loomed out of the fog. He banked right. Stormfly and the Night Fury broke left. As soon as the pillar passed, he flipped over, turning as hard as he could to catch up.

Another pillar rushed towards them. Hiccup’s jaws opened, heat flaring in his chest. A streak of blue fire illuminated the mists. The base of the stack exploded, sending boulders tumbling into Stormfly’s path. The Nadder dodged right, narrowly escaping the falling rocks. The slight deceleration was enough for Hiccup to close the distance.

Mere feet separated them from Stormfly now. Somehow, she could outfly them in a straight line, but in the turns the Night Furies held the advantage. Still, in the twisting confines of the sea stacks it was enough, barely.

Stormfly darted left. This time, the Night Fury fired, collapsing another stack in her path. In the moment it took the Nadder to react, Hiccup fired again. Astrid leant to the right and Stormfly rolled in the same motion. The Nadder’s cream underbelly flashed as his shot blazed past. The moment
the pair was upright, they dove, swooping beneath a natural archway.

Hiccup’s wings folded, following. As soon as they were through, Stormfly tried to break away. This time, a whistle and a bolt of blue lightning came from above. Another stack exploded and the Nadder banked sharply to evade.

Hiccup’s heart raced. His breath came in insufficient gasps. Stormfly lashed her tail. He rolled, narrowly avoiding the flurry of deadly spines. His wings strained to make up the lost speed. Spots danced in his vision. Even with the Queen forcing him on, he physically couldn’t keep up this pace.

Come on Stormfly, he prayed, just a little bit longer.

The mists began to thin. Stormfly twisted, darting between a pair of sea stacks. Hiccup fired. As his shot connected with the stone, Stormfly folded her wings and dove. The explosion shattered the pillar into cloud of deadly falling rocks. Stormfly held her dive, racing the boulders to the ocean’s surface. At the last moment she pulled up, speeding beneath the stones and out into the safety of the open sea.

YES! Stormfly!

The flock roared. The mists lit with flame. Dragons swarmed out of the fog on either side, converging on Astrid and Stormfly.

The Queen’s strategy suddenly dawned on Hiccup. He and the Night Fury were never meant to catch Stormfly; all they needed to do was slow her down enough for the flock to cut them off.

Hiccup’s wings beat a mercifully slower pace as he rose above the whirling mass of dragons. Below, Astrid and Stormfly spun and turned, defiantly weaving between Gronckle fireballs and Nightmares’ blazing claws, all while the Queen’s jaws slowly closed on them.

His eyes darted back and forth in their sockets as he traced the pair’s desperate flight. The world around him blurred. Below, green light sparked off the ocean, reflecting the aurorae above. His jaws cracked open.

Kill them.

No... Hiccup thought; he couldn’t, he’d promised to save Stormfly’s people, and he’d seen the humanity beneath Astrid’s steely exterior.

He wouldn’t.

He forced his wings straight. A lance of red-hot agony stabbed into his skull. His vision dimmed as the Queen’s will slammed down on him.

No!

Something sparked within him, like his fire, but not; alien, but also familiar. His body spasmed, nearly falling out of the sky. Hiccup focused all his will on that spark, nurturing it and drawing strength from it as he pushed back against the Queen.

His vision swam, the spark within him flickering and dying. It wasn’t enough. He blinked. His vision was filled by a radiant emerald curtain. The spark within him flared, resonating with the light above. His whole body tingled - If he still had hair he knew it would be standing on end - he could feel the tremendous energy trapped in the glistening sheets.
His vision darkened as the Queen’s will bore down on him, smothering the spark to little more than a dull ember. He couldn’t see anymore, but he could still feel the light of the aurorae shining as bright as ever. The Queen tightened her mental grip, crushing him out of existence. The light he needed was just there, so close. On instinct, he reached out and drew it into him.

Power blazed within him.

He listed to one side, his flight no longer controlled by another mind. Hiccup pulled in his wings, turning the motion into a dive. Below, a Nightmare swooped down to block Astrid and Stormfly’s path. He didn’t think. His shot struck the Nightmare’s wing-shoulder. A terrible, agonised screech split the air as the dragon fell.

“Fly, Stormfly!” Hiccup roared as he pulled out of the dive. He glanced behind. Half the flock had turned away from the Nadder and now bore down on him. He rolled - feeling the flash of heat as Gronckle fireballs fell past him - then turned his head to the sky and surged upwards. The pain in his muscles had vanished, and light flooded through him, filling him with fierce energy.

As soon as he was above the flock, he flipped over and dove again. An orange Nadder was closing in on Stormfly’s tail. He fired. There was a crash of thunder, a pause, then a splash. Hiccup felt a pang of guilt as he arced beneath Stormfly. These dragons were more innocent victims of the Queen’s tyranny, but he knew he couldn’t afford to hesitate; the Queen wouldn’t give him or Stormfly the luxury.

That moment’s inattention cost him. He didn’t see the Nightmare coming until it was too late. He crashed head-on into its broad crimson chest. The Nightmare’s claws traced lines of agony down his chest as its teeth closed on his neck.

Hiccup saw red. He thrashed, lashing out with all four legs. He felt his claws catch, then tear through flesh. He roared, a sound of primal fear and rage, then bathed the Nightmare in a stream of fire. The dragon screeched, and let go. He shoved away, launching into steep climb.

Focus! He berated himself, casting about for Astrid and Stormfly. He spotted them a few hundred yards ahead, leading their own pack of pursuers. With a furious hiss, a Zippleback dive-bombed him, trailing green smoke. The gas stung in his nostrils as he rolled out of the way. A pair of Nadders swooped towards him, claws extended. He fired two quick shots, then dove for the gap they’d left in the flock.

His wings shot out as soon as he was clear. The light flared within him, and with every flap he surged forward. In moments he was level with Stormfly. He banked sharply - shedding speed - and whipped back past her. The pursuing flock was rapidly thinning out as exhausted dragons fell off the pace. Hiccup dove, unleashing his fire on the leading Nightmare. He followed his shot down. In a blink of an eye and a rush of noise the flock sped past him.

He forced his wings open. Behind him, the Nightmare’s body splashed down, throwing up a plume of spray. Revitalised hope surged within him as he skimmed over the ocean. Ahead, a familiar and welcome silhouette loomed on the horizon; Berk. He pushed his tail upwards, arching into a tight half-loop. As he flipped right-side up, mouth open, fire building in his chest, the flock scattered.

Hiccup locked his wings straight and glided, numbly watching the dragons winging their way towards the nest as fast as their spent bodies would allow. As he hung in the air, the light within him faded. The weary ache returned to his muscles as the energy retreated to a point deep within him - part of him, but also separate - where he instinctively knew he could call on it again.

He blinked, finally able to think beyond his immediate survival. He’d made it: He was free, and
he’d used magic - The Aür, Stormfly had called it. He turned in a wide circle and fell in alongside the Nadder. He took a deep breath and opened his mouth -

A rising whistle shattered the silence.

“Hiccup!” Astrid gasped.

He cursed; in the rush of escape he’d forgotten the Night Fury!

Reflexively, he reached for the light within him, feeling the energy rush through him as his mind whirled.

*Can’t dodge. Not enough time.*

He twisted, flipping his back to the ocean. A black shape was outlined against the green-tinged clouds. An azure star fell towards him. He took a sharp breath and fired back. Their shots met in mid-air. The sea was illuminated by blinding white flash. A heartbeat later, the shock wave threw him, spinning, towards the ocean.

Precious moments passed as Hiccup wrestled back control of his flight. Still blinking the flash from his eyes, he raced towards Berks sea stacks, skimming just above the white-caps.

“*Stormfly, Go!*” he yelled.

A diving shriek came from above, and a second firebolt shot over his head, collapsing the stack in front of him. Hiccup dodged left, past another stack.

*Not again.*

He flexed the muscles along his spine, and felt the same *popping* sensation run down his back. He tightened his turn, his spine mere inches from the rock’s surface as he looped around the pillar. As he came out the other side the Night Fury shot past him. He straightened out.

She was right in front of him. He breathed in sharply, sending air to his fire-source.

He hesitated. He felt *something* coming from her; like the energy from the Northern Lights, but coiled and twisted somehow. The moment passed; The Night Fury realised his deception and dove away. Hiccup gritted his teeth, swooping after her.

In the failing light, the Night Fury was almost invisible; a black blur against stony grey pillars. Hiccup felt like he could almost follow her without his sight. He could feel a twisted core of energy lodged within her, unlike the warm, invigorating light coursing through him, it radiated anger and hate like heat from an open forge.

A stack sped towards them. The Night Fury drifted right, then at the last moment, darted left. Hiccup banked sharply - wings momentarily vertical - and followed. Another pillar. As the Night Fury dodged, her head snapped to the side and she fired beneath her wing, striking the base of the stack. Hiccup willed the light within him into his wings, pushing against the air harder than he thought possible. He shot forwards, outrunning the ponderously falling rocks.

The Night Fury broke right, then left. Hiccup matched her move for move; A brief straight, another few inches gained; then a roll, into another turn. A slight irregularity crept into the Night Fury’s wingbeats; she was tiring - Hiccup was almost close enough to see her sides heaving as she struggled to bring in enough air. The energy within her burned even fiercer, the malaise surrounding it lashing out at him.
A final stack loomed ahead. Past it, Hiccup glimpsed a sheer cliff; they were out of time. The Night Fury roared - in pain or anger, he wasn't sure - and put on a last burst of speed. Hiccup followed, barreling straight towards the monolith. The energy within the Night Fury blazed brighter. Pain stabbed in his temples as the malevolent force struck at him. Hiccup grunted, the light within him flaring as he pushed onwards, the inches separating him and the Night Fury closing, as they sped towards the stack.

His tail twitched minutely, nearly breaking away. He was so close, he could almost reach out to the energy within her, like he had to the Northern Lights. *Come on,* he thought, his instincts screaming at him to turn away. *Just a little more...*

A tiny flicker of movement down the Fury’s dorsal spines were his only warning. The Night Fury broke left. Hiccup dove right, his claws skimming the surface of the stone. As soon as he was past he flipped. He *heard* his spine creak as his body twisted, putting his back to the pillar as he whipped around the other side.

The Night Fury burst out from the other side of the stack and strove for altitude. Hiccup turned his nose skyward, climbing alongside her. For a moment they were level, then - as they shot past the clifftop - Hiccup pulled ahead. The boy-turned-Night-Fury surged upwards, then rolled over backwards and dove.

The Night Fury tried to evade, but her exhausted muscles were too slow. Hiccup slammed into her from above. As soon as his claws made contact, the malevolent energy struck out at him. He finally recognised it as the Queen’s power. Her will plowed into him, only to bounce off the Auric power flowing through him with the mental equivalent of a ringing note. In that instant, he felt the Queen’s emotions; boiling rage and hatred, and also a frisson of fear.

*How?* The Queen roared in his mind.

The Night Fury writhed in his grasp, as the Queen battered at his consciousness. Hiccup gritted his teeth, mentally pushing back, while he tightened his grip on the Night Fury. He spread his wings, fighting to control their tumbling fall. Below them, he glimpsed a gap in the trees, and he desperately tried to steer them towards it.

The Queen’s attack faltered, and he reacted instinctively. He pushed back, gathering as much of his energy as he could and sending it *into* the Night Fury, swamping the Queen’s power. The next moment, they hit the treetops and the Night Fury was torn from his grasp.

The world spun end over end. He pulled in his wings, shielding them as best he could as a storm of branches whipped at his scales.

When he hit the water it felt like solid ice.

Hiccup gasped, only for water to rush into his maw. He floundered for a moment, then his feet struck the bottom and his head broke the surface. He coughed up a mouthful of water, then took in several great gulps of air. Blinking tears from his eyes, he looked around at the familiar surroundings of the cove.

He was stood in the shallows of the cove’s lake, water gently lapping at his underside. The Night Fury lay motionless nearby, at the end of a muddy trough ploughed into the lake’s shore.

Shaking off the water, he slowly approached her. In his mind, he was back in the forest above, human; *he pressed himself to the ground, peeking over the ridge, then darted forwards, putting his*
back against a boulder while he fumbled for his knife with trembling hands. A deep breath, then a step out into the open.

Hiccup stepped up to the edge of the trench carved by her impact and looked down on the Night Fury. She had ended up on her side, one wing trapped beneath her, and the other splayed awkwardly in the air. Beneath the outstretched limb, her ribs were outlined on grey-mottled skin as her chest rose and fell.

Behind his eyes, Dökkhöfn burned. Thuggory’s agonised screams beside the remains of his father echoed in his mind over and over, drowning out the quiet murmurings of nature. His whole body ached; he felt the ghost of her fangs sinking into his wing-shoulder.

The whole situation felt surreal and dreamlike to Hiccup, adrenaline still coursing through him. However, he could feel the true reality of the last couple of days lurking at the edge of his consciousness like mountain snow in deepest winter; ready to come crashing down in an avalanche of pain and grief.

This is all her fault.

Hiccup inhaled sharply. His fire-source was sore and overused, but he had one final shot left. He looked down -

- and met a deep green eye staring up at him.

“Do it,” The Night Fury wheezed.

Those few words were all she could manage. Her eye closed, and her head dropped to rest in the mud. Hiccup held the shot. His gaze drifted from her head down to his forepaws.

Blood from the Nightmare he’d grappled with still clung to his claws. He remembered the cries of the dragons he’d killed in their escape.

His legs gave out, and he dropped to the ground beside her, exhaling a puff of greenish gas.

“No,” he breathed. “No more death.”

Chapter End Notes

Icelandic:
Dökkhöfn - Dark harbour (or port) - The wiki tells me this is a place on Meathead Island in the books and it sounds like a good name for a village.

Mythology:
Sandraudiga - Literally: ‘She who dyes the sands red’ - A lesser Germanic goddess attested to in a Latin inscription found in the Netherlands. Here, it is the name of Astrid’s axe.
Chapter 13: Muninn

Chapter Notes

And we're all caught up! Updates for this story will now proceed in time with those on FanFiction.net (Chapter 14 is written and awaiting editing; hopefully, it will go up sometime in the next couple of weeks)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 13: Muninn

Thunder, followed by the crash of falling rocks, rolled across Berk while Stormfly swooped down towards the training ring. On her back, Astrid gazed in the direction of Berk’s sea stacks, uneasy. It felt wrong leaving, but she knew their part in the battle was over - the final confrontation would be between Hiccup and the Night Fury, alone.

He’ll be okay, she told herself, remembering how he’d flown in their desperate flight across the ocean to Berk.

He had reminded her why Night Furies held a position of mythical terror in the minds of most Vikings. He was a dark blur, weaving through the flock faster than the eye could follow. Every time his fires flashed, another dragon tumbled into a watery grave. She scarcely believed he was the same boy-turned-dragon who’d stumbled over his tail and struggled to even get off the ground a few days ago.

Stormfly snorted beneath her. Astrid started - lost in her thoughts she hadn’t felt them landing. Her Nadder looked back at her with a single, golden eye, letting out a gentle croon.

“I’m okay, girl,” Astrid replied, resting a hand beneath the crown of spines on the back of Stormfly’s head - the scales were warm and soft beneath her fingers. “I’m just worried about Hiccup.”

Stormfly chirped reassuringly as Astrid slid down from her back. She kept her hand in place, trailing down her dragon’s neck as she dismounted. Above them, the clouds had parted as twilight descended, and brilliant green flashes - the last remnants of the aurorae - chased across the sky in their wake. Unwilling to end the moment, Astrid simply stared upwards in quiet awe.

Stormfly broke the silence. With a soft hum, she stepped forwards into the arena. Without thinking, Astrid moved with her, keeping her place alongside. Like that, they slowly crossed the arena together, towards the gaping black maw of the Nadder’s cage. The whole way, Astrid’s hand never left Stormfly’s scales - she wasn’t sure whether she did it to reassure herself or the Nadder; it just felt right.

Too soon, they arrived at the threshold of the cage. Astrid turned to face her Nadder, another apology on her lips. Stormfly stopped her, leaning forwards to lick from her chin up one side of her face. Astrid grimaced, but also felt a smile tug at her lips, recognising the meaning of the gesture;

It’s okay.
Wiping her eye, Astrid looked up to meet Stormfly’s gaze. Great golden eyes blinked slowly back at her. She grasped for words; Stormfly had saved her life before, but something had passed between them in the moment her Nadder broke free of the Queen’s control. She didn’t understand it, but she knew things were different between them now. She wanted to express her gratitude to Stormfly for saving her and Hiccup again, but something told her that the Nadder already knew how she felt.

Eventually, she raised her other hand to rest on the Nadder’s jaw, and whispered “I’ll see you again soon, girl.”

Stormfly hummed in response, then pulled back, into the darkness of her cage. Astrid had to stop herself from stepping forwards and reaching out for the Nadder. Tearing herself away, she focused on pushing closed the great iron-reinforced doors.

The cell slammed shut with a thunk and a clank as the lock engaged. Astrid slumped against the door. The shadowy, empty arena suddenly felt lonely and oppressive. The dragon saliva on her cheek was cold against her skin. She shivered.

Astrid pushed herself up, striding across the arena. All the way, the doors tugged at her, as if she could feel Stormfly’s eyes following her through the wood and metal. She hugged her arms tightly across her chest and pushed onwards; she needed to get home - the gods only knew what she was going to tell her mother after her sudden disappearance from the docks.

A shadow stepped into the mouth of the arena, blocking her path. Her hand flew to her waist, only to close on empty air - her knife had slipped from her fingers when Stormfly snatched her from the nest.

“Who’s there?”

The sound of muffled activity came from outside the ring, followed by the striking of a flint. A second figure stepped into view; Gobber, carrying a lantern on his hook.

The flickering orange light illuminated the silhouette of none other than Chief Stoick the Vast. Astrid’s heart leapt into her throat. She was caught; it was over. “C-chief,” she stammered, “I can explain, I-”

“Aye, lassie,” Gobber cut in. “You’ve got a lot of explainin’ to do.”

The Chief was silent for several beats. He looked like a statue of an angry god; his eyes unreadable emerald chips. The only flaw in the illusion was the steady tightening of his fist on his sword-hilt. Eventually he spoke.

“You will come with us.” His tone didn’t leave any room for argument. “Then, you will tell us everything.”

“Do it,” The last Night Fury gasped.

“No,” the stranger growled. “No more death.”

For a time, the only sound in the cove was their panted breaths. True night descended. Nocturnal creatures awoke, announcing their presence to the night air, and slowly, the haze of shock and exhaustion receded, the reality of her situation setting in.
The Queen was gone.

Trapped beneath her, her wing ached. Her body heaved onto her front, and her tail -no- she swung her tail around, bringing her fins into view. She slowly fanned them open and closed.

“Is that it?” she thought, “All this time, and you throw me away without a care. Is that how little I meant to you?”

“Sorry?” The stranger asked.

She started, ear-fins shooting straight up. “I-” She hadn’t realised she’d spoken aloud. She met the stranger’s aurora-green gaze. Again, he seemed achingly, impossibly familiar to her. There was a long pause, as she found herself staring at him, unable to look away.

It had been so long since she’d seen another of her kind. She’d forgotten what a Night Fury’s features looked like when not twisted into a mask of hate or fear. When she found her tongue again, she and the stranger spoke at the same time.

“Why now?” “Why me?”

The stranger nodded. “You first.”

“Why now?” she repeated, “All these years I thought I was the last... where have you been? Why show up now?” As an afterthought she added “Are you alone? Did more Furies survive?” Hazy visions of a secret colony of Night Furies took flight behind her eyes. Trinity, it had been so long, she could hardly imagine what it would look like...

“I... uh...” The stranger hesitated.

“What is it?” She rose to her feet. “Please tell me, I need to know!”

The stranger tilted his head to the side. “You don’t remember...”

“What? What don’t I remember? Please...”

The stranger took a deep breath. “I’m not a Night Fury - or, at least, I never used to be one.”

It was her turn to tilt her head in confusion; what was he talking about?! Of course he’s a Night Fury!

“I was a human,” the stranger continued, “a Viking, I shot you down, about a week ago.” She winced, feeling a sudden pounding pressure in her skull. As the stranger spoke his next words, she felt she knew what he was going to say. “I let you go, and...”

“I...”

The memories flooded back with enough force to physically stagger her.

She remembered the agony of being shot down, and the relief of finding herself beneath the human hatchling’s blade. Then the moment of decision, when she tore this human from all he knew and threw him into mortal danger, on a desperate, foolish hope.

The ember of hope within her, that somehow her species had survived, died; she truly was the last. She slumped to the ground, looking up at the hatchling. “What was your name?” she asked softly.

“Hiccup.”
“Hiccup,” she tested the strange, foreign syllables. “I’m sorry, you didn’t deserve this.”

Hiccup stared at her for a long moment. “It’s okay, I understand.”

“How...?”

“You were alone, trapped in a life that was slowly killing you, and you took a desperate chance. It shouldn’t have worked; but you had to try.” He took a breath. “I can’t imagine what you’ve been through; but that I know.”

She couldn’t bear to look into his wide, compassionate eyes any more. Her hope began to rekindle. She shook her head. *Foolish.*

“Go,” she told him. “The Qu-”

*She cowered, pressing herself against the rock as a monster several times larger than her sire towered over her.*

**You belong to me now.**

She shuddered. “She will come for me. You should go, fly south, get as far away from her as you can, try to live the rest of your life in peace.”

“No,” Hiccup replied firmly. “This is - or, was - my home. I can’t abandon it. We have a plan, The Nadder, her rider, and I; with your help we think we can defeat The Queen.”

She couldn’t ignore the voice within her any more. *Perhaps it’s not hopeless,* it whispered, *He already did the impossible, freeing you, maybe he could beat her.*

Hiccup suddenly turned tail and walked away.

“Wait, where are you going?”

He stopped atop a slight rise in the ground, flamed the grass beneath him, and settled down facing her.

“Come on.” He tossed his head. “Get yourself out of the mud.”

She pushed herself up, raised a forepaw and hesitated - it had been so long, did she even remember how to *walk* by herself? She shook her head, and shakily padded over to him.

“Stormfly told me the history of the dragons,” he began as she lay down on the edge of the blackened patch. “About you,” he continued in a softer tone. “And what the Queen’s control does to your mind.

“Do- do you remember your name?”

“I...” What was the point in a name when you were the last of your kind? “...no.”

Hiccup was quiet for several seconds. His ear-fins twitched, and she heard him muttering under his breath.


She blinked “What?”
“Your new name,” he explained, “It’s the name of a raven from my people’s stories. It literally means ‘memory’.”

She wasn’t sure how she felt about being named for a character in Viking myth, but the name did have a certain something to it...

Hiccup looked down at his paws. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have done that. If you want to pick your own name, I understand.”

“No,” Muninn replied, “I like it.”

Hiccup shuffled closer. He leaned in, and ran his tongue along her flank, cleaning away the mud plastered to her scales. The ghosts of long-forgotten memories shifted just beyond her perception. She couldn’t help the shudder that went through her.

Hiccup jerked back. “I-”

“S-sorry,” she stammered, “Carry on, it's been...”

“I know,” he murmured, leaning in to clean her forepaw.

“You must have questions,” he began. “Astrid - the Viking on the Nadder earlier - she was there when you transformed me...”

Between passes of his tongue, he told her a story of being chased into this very cove, of meeting with Astrid, convincing her of his identity, and then of the human fledgling befriending a Nadder the Vikings kept prisoner, whom she named Stormfly.

At some point during the tale, his words faded into a murmur, and she slipped into hazy memories of endless winter nights, being groomed by a faceless, nameless shadow. Her parents? Or a sibling she couldn't remember?

“Muninn?” She distantly realised Hiccup’s ministrations had ceased some time ago.

She opened her jaw to respond, but her eyes watered, and all that escaped was a choked whimper.

“It’s okay,” Hiccup crooned, “It’s over now.”

“I know,” she sobbed, “I know.”

Wordlessly, Hiccup extended his wing and draped it over her.

With that, the hastily constructed dam against her feelings came crashing down. Waves of grief flooded through her; for her parents, and the siblings she may not remember; for the hundreds of dragons she’d been forced to kill; for the memories the Queen had stolen from her, and for the long years of her adolescence spent with only the bitter company of her thoughts.

There, beneath the wing of the human she’d transformed, for the first time since the Queen had taken her, the last - no, *she*, Muninn - wept.

The great hall was silent as a barrow when Astrid entered. The central fire was banked, the coals radiating a dull red glow that barely reached the perimeter of the great table enclosing it. Packed into the ring of ruddy light, augmented by a handful of candles, was Spitelout, Phlegma and the rest of Stoick’s council. Off to one side, stood her parents, Balder and Gunhilda, and her younger brother, Orvar. Further away still, halfway into shadow, lurked the old man, Mildew.
The door slammed shut with a portentous thud. A small gasp came from her mother as the assembled people looked up. Her father’s expression was stormy - she wasn’t sure if his ire was directed at her or Stoick. Meanwhile, Orvar simply stared at her in mix of shock and confusion. She wasn’t sure what they had been told, but Gunhilda looked physically hurt by the accusations.

“I’m sorry mother,” Astrid gasped. “I can explain, I-”

“Quiet, girl,” Stoick snapped, behind her. “You can explain yourself to the council.”

The chief led her to the near end of the table, then walked around to join the council. He glowered at her down the full length of the table for several seconds, but rather than addressing her, he instead turned to the side.

“Mildew, tell the council what you told me earlier.”

“Of course, chief.”

Astrid scowled; according to her father, the only time the man showed proper respect for authority was when it benefited him.

“Well, I was tending to me cabbages one morning a few days past, when something caused a terrible racket, stirring up all the birds on my side of the island. I looked up, expecting to see a hawk or some such, but instead there was a Nadder, all alone, in broad daylight. Now, this was strange enough, so I looked closer, and I swear by Odin’s sacrificial eye, that I saw someone riding on that dragon’s back.”

A chorus of surprised muttering rose from the council’s end of the table.

“Now, I know me eyesight isn’t as good as it used to be,” Mildew continued. “So I told no-one about it.”

“Only ‘cos nobody can stand you long enough to strike up conversation,” Gobber muttered.

Stoick shot a glare at his old friend. “Carry on.”

“This afternoon, something spooked the birds again. I looked up and there was the same lone Nadder, coming from the direction of the kill ring. This time I got a clear look; I thought the dragon looked familiar, like I’d seen it before somewhere; Then I realised, it was the beast from the ring.”

The old man leered at her. “This time there was definitely someone on it’s back, a young woman with a long braid.”

Her father stepped up to the table, his face crimson. “Don’t tell me you believe this nonsense, Stoick! My daughter is top of her class in training! She would never-”

“Where was your daughter this afternoon?” Stoick interrupted.

“I-” he floundered. “She disappeared after that scene at the docks, but-”

“Exactly,” Spitelout cut in. “She has been spending a lot of time alone in the woods recently, hasn’t she?”

“I-”

Her father cut her off. “What is this Stoick?! You’ve already cast out my brother and disgraced my
family, if you want to exterminate the Hofferson line, just say so and let’s be done with it!” His hand went to his sword.

The clatter of steel echoed off the walls as the council drew their weapons.

“ENOUGH!” Stoick roared.

The hall immediately fell quiet enough to hear the gentle crackling of the coals on the hearth. In a low voice, barely audible to Astrid at the other end of the table, the chief continued “You will restrain yourself Balder, or I will have you removed.”

“Yes chief,” he mumbled, dropping his hand to his side.

Stoick continued as if he had merely paused for breath. He turned to Mildew, who had retreated into shadow the moment tempers had flared. “After seeing this,” he said, “you immediately came to me?”

“Aye,” The old man croaked.

Stoick nodded. “Thank you, Mildew. Upon hearing this, Gobber and I went to the arena to investigate. We found the main gates open, and the Nadder cage empty. Only a fool would be so brazen as to try something like this without at least attempting to hide the evidence, so we waited to see if the culprit came back.

“As the sun set, we heard explosions and the sounds of a Night Fury coming from the sea stacks.” An uneasy murmur passed through the room. “A short time later, the Nadder landed outside the ring.” He turned to her father, “On its back was a makeshift saddle, and your daughter, Balder.”

Her father staggered back a half-step, opening his mouth, but no words came out.

“Gobber, is this true?” asked Phlegma the Fierce.

“Aye,” the smith replied, unusually serious. “She petted the beast like it were the family dog, and it followed her into its cage without a complaint. If I hadn’t seen it with me own eyes I wouldn’t have believed it.”

Stoick turned his steely gaze on her, pinning her, alone, at the far end of the great table. She suddenly found she couldn’t look anywhere other than down at the wood in front of her.

“Astrid Hofferson, you know the punishment for betraying the tribe and treating with our enemies. Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

“Oh gods, Chief, I’m sorry, it wasn’t meant to happen like this...” She stopped herself. She had the whole council in front of her. If her part of the plan was ever going to work, now was her chance. She took a deep breath, then forced herself to stand up straight and meet the chief’s glare.

“Yes,” she began, “I have been spending time with the Nadder from the ring.”

Another wave of uneasy muttering came from the council.

“Astrid,” her father spoke over the noise, “Think about this.”

She couldn’t bring herself to meet his gaze. “Please, let me finish. In the few days I’ve spent with her, I’ve learnt more about dragons than we have in seven generations!”
“Quiet!” Stoick barked, “We owe her the right to speak.” He turned back to face her.

“Her,” he said.

“What?”

“You called the dragon, ‘her’,”

“Yes,” she replied, “She’s female.” She hoped she sounded more confident that she felt. “That’s not all I learned; the dragons, they’re kind, merciful creatures.”

Spitelout scoffed audibly.

“Gobber,” Astrid began, turning to the smith, “You remember about a week ago, I slashed the Nadder’s wing in training?” He nodded. “Did you see any sign of that injury today?”

“It was dark, but I can’t say I did.”

“Because that night, after training, I went back to the arena and treated her wing; I opened her cage unarmed, and she let me help her. Then, when I was trapped by the storm, she sheltered me beneath her wings. She saved my life, when she had every reason to leave me to die.”

“And where did you get the supplies to treat this dragon?” Spitelout sneered. “I suppose you stole them from the village? From supplies needed for the warriors who defend our home?”

Astrid despaired inwardly. How could they not see what her words meant? Had she really once been so blind?

“If we keep fighting as we are, we won’t have a home to defend much longer!” She gestured to the great doors behind her. “We’ve lost half the village! Do any of you honestly believe we’ll be able to survive the winter and fend off more dragon raids?” She met the gaze of each of the council members one by one. Nobody spoke.

“We need a new way to fight, and the dragons are giving us that chance. They’re intelligent, they don’t want to fight us; they’re being forced to by their queen. They hate her as much as we hate them; if we free them they’ll join forces with us to fight her and end the raids once and for all.”

Stoick regarded her for a moment. “And where is this Queen?”

“In their nest.”

Spitelout guffawed. “No Viking has set foot in the nest in seven generations. Stoick, this is nonsense, let’s-”

The chief held out his hand. “How do you know this, girl?”

Astrid took a deep breath. This was it; her next words would either save or condemn her. “Hiccup told me.”

Stoick’s eyes darkened like approaching thunderheads. His hand dropped to his waist to clench on his sword. “My son is dead.”

“With respect chief, he isn’t; I saw him earlier today.”

Nobody dared to make a sound in the great hall. The look in Stoick’s eyes told her everything; *Explain yourself. Or else*.
She took a breath. “I should start at the beginning. The night Hiccup disappeared, he said he shot down the Night Fury. Like you, I didn’t believe him, but when I saw him slip out of the village at dawn, I followed him. He led me into the forest towards Raven Point, where we came across a downed dragon, tied up with bolas. It’s scales were pure black; it had to be the Night Fury.”

Stoick leaned forwards, bracing his hands against the table.

“Hiccup moved in for the kill, then...” She hesitated; did she tell Stoick his son had turned traitor before his transformation, and make her story all the harder to swallow? All the times she’d deceived the villagers she’d told herself that she was still loyal to Berk - that all she did was for their own good; she couldn’t lie to her chief.

“Then what?!” Stoick pounded the table with his fist. “Tell me!”

Astrid flinched. “He let her go,” she blurted out. “Before I could react, the Night Fury was on top of him. She was moments away from killing him, when she broke free from the Queen’s control, and she...” her courage failed her.

“And she... what?” Stoick asked quietly.

“...she changed him, transformed him, into a Night Fury.”

The great hall rang with shouts of disagreement, first from Spitelout and her father, and then from the rest of the council as they weighed in with their own views. Astrid heard them distantly; she saw only Stoick’s face as he stared back at her, silent and motionless.

For a moment, Stoick’s impassive visage cracked, sorrow and grief crossing his features. “So, the Night Furies that attacked the Meatheads, one of them was...”

Astrid nodded solemnly. “…Hiccup, yes.” When she looked up, Stoick’s face was blank and emotionless. Her heart dropped into her stomach. “Chief, please,” she begged. “It’s not his fault! The Queen forces the dragons to fight for her, but Hiccup broke free! He saved my life!”

Stoick straightened up. “Where is my son now?”

“There’s a cove just south of Raven Point,” she guessed. “Please, let me come with you, we’ll show you that it’s still Hiccup in there, and—”

“Spitelout!” Stoick barked. “Gather twenty of our best men, and wait outside my hut; tell them we’re going to avenge Dökkhöfn.” He turned to her father. “Balder, take your daughter away. She’s not a Viking. I’ll deal with her when we get back.” With that, he stepped away from the table and marched purposefully towards the doors.

“Stoick, No!” Astrid shouted, desperate. “We can’t do this alone! The Queen’s a hundred times bigger than any dragon you’ve seen! We need Hiccup’s help!”

Stoick stopped, and slowly turned to face her. “You’ve seen her. So you’ve been to their island.”

“Yes, but only the dragons know how to get there, I—”

“Gobber,” Stoick commanded, “Ready the ships. We sail at dawn.”

Stoick managed a single stride towards the door before Gobber called out. “Pardon me for questioning your orders, chief, but which ships exactly do you want me to ready? All our remaining warships went with you on the last hunt.”
“Then use the fishing ships if you have to!” Stoick snapped. “The war ends here!”

Before anyone could raise any further objections, the chief turned on his heels and stormed out, the great oaken doors booming like thunder in his wake.

When Hiccup awoke, the moon hung high in the sky, turning the world below into delicate silver sculpture. He felt Muninn shift beside him, still huddled beneath his wing. He’d done what he could to comfort her as grief overtook her, but what could he - what could anyone - say to ease her pain? Mercifully, after a few minutes she’d succumbed to exhaustion.

The Night Fury beside him stirred again, and he looked down at her. Her eyes blinked open, her pupils expanding and contracting before focusing on him.

“Hi,” he blurted out. “Are you...” He paused, ‘okay’ didn’t feel right. “...better?”

Muninn pushed herself up onto her paws. He pulled back his wing as she trotted down to the shore, then stepped up beside her as she took a drink from the lake.

“I... I’ll live. Beyond that...” she sighed.

She turned to face him. “Sorry about earlier. You know I haven’t had any contact with other Furies in... a very long time. I let my emotions get the better of me... you didn’t need to see that.” She looked down at her paws. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize,” Hiccup said softly. “You’ve been through more than I could possibly imagine; you’d have to be made of stone to not feel something about what happened to you.”

Muninn darted forward, touching the tip of her nose to his shoulder. “Thank you,” she murmured, then jerked away, staring across the moon’s shimmering reflected surface. After a moment, she spoke again. “You said you and the Nadder, Stormfly, have a plan to defeat the Q-” she seemed to choke on her words for a moment, “her, and you need my help.”

“Yes,” Hiccup replied. “If we’re going to take on the Queen, we need dragons on our side, and the only way to get them is to free them from her. So, if the next time they raid us, we can knock a couple out while they’re distracted, the Queen won’t know what hit them. Then we can free them, and persuade them to join us; weakening her forces and growing ours at the same time.”

Muninn was silent.

“What do you think?” he asked. “It won’t end the war tomorrow, but raid by raid we’ll grow stronger, until we can take her down.”

He cringed internally at his final words. How did it come to this? When did he go from being unable to kill a single dragon, to plotting to kill another, and send many more to their deaths in the process?

“My whole kind went to war against her,” Muninn whispered, “and they lost. The few that survived... didn’t live long.”

“I’m sorry...” Hiccup began.

“No,” she shook herself, and turned back to him. “I don't know... it could work. She doesn’t keep as many dragons by her side as those days, but you’d still need hundreds to get through to her. Surely the Flock or the Vikings would find you before then?”
“That’s where Astrid and Stormfly come in. They can’t do anything about the Flock, but they’re working to show the Vikings what free dragons are like. If she can get through to them that we want peace as much as they do, they’ll ally with us, and join us when we attack the nest.”

“Will they listen to her?”

Hiccup sighed. “They’re Vikings, and they’re cornered; who knows what they’ll do?.” He yawned, and half-stretched his wings before his over-exerted flight muscles cramped up, a bark of pain escaping his maw.

“Ow,” he groaned, pushing himself to his feet. “Come on.” He inclined his head, then padded off to find a fresh patch of grass to lie on. He flamed a new swathe of ground and settled down. “You don’t have to make a decision tonight. Hopefully Astrid and Stormfly will come out here in a few days and we can discuss our next move then.” After a few moments, Muninn came over and laid her head down on her paws beside him.

For a time they were silent; Muninn alone with her thoughts, and Hiccup taking in the sounds and scents of the night. A burst of high-pitched staccato clicks caught his attention. His ear-fins pricked up and his gaze turned skyward. There was a pause, then it came again; a sound not too dissimilar from the chattering of the flock. A wave of unease swept through him, before he spotted the small, dark shapes flitting between the cliffs, and realised what they were; bats.

Huh, Hiccup snorted. He turned his gaze back to the cove, and the Night Fury beside him. “Muninn,” he whispered.

She blinked and looked up at him.

“I know you don’t remember much, but is there anything you can tell me about our power - The Aûr?”

Muninn stared off into the distance for a while. “I don’t think I was old enough to have proper lessons when I was...” she trailed off. “All I remember are scraps of what my sire told me. What do you want to know?”

Hiccup thought for a moment. “For a start: How did you transform me?”

“I’m not sure. The Aûr can be used to change one material into another - every hatchling knew that - but as far as I know transforming one living thing into another was only done in stories. It took almost all the power I’d built up while I was under her control.”

He took a deep breath. “When this is all over, could you change me back again?”

Muninn looked down at her paws. “I don’t know. Transforming you was... instinctive; even if I had enough power, I’m not sure I could do it again. Going the other way... you need to be able to visualise what you want to change something into, and I barely know anything about what you were like as a Viking. Maybe you could do it yourself, but my sire always warned me never to try and change myself...

“I’m sorry, Hiccup.”

“It’s okay,” he murmured absentmindedly. Inside, his mind whirled. This was it. This was as close as he was going to get to an unequivocal statement that he was stuck like this. He felt strangely calm; he expected the news that he’d never be human again to be more devastating.

He wasn’t sure what unsettled him more: being told he’d be a dragon for the rest of his life, or that
his heart already seemed to have accepted it.

Stoick the Vast, chief of the Hairy Hooligans of Berk, prowled silently through the forest, his fist clenched tightly around the shaft of his warhammer. Behind him ranged nineteen of Berk’s finest warriors, all of them veterans of numerous dragon raids, not one with fewer than fifty kills to their name.

A flicker of motion ahead caught Stoick’s eye. He raised his hand for the men to stop, adjusted his grip on his hammer, then crept forwards. Somewhere in the trees in front, a lone owl hooted. Stoick lowered his weapon, letting out a slow breath. To the untrained ear, the sound had been just another nighttime animal; but the chief knew it as a signal.

Sure enough, crouched at the base of a nearby pine, was Hoark, the village’s senior scout. The chief dropped to one knee beside the man. “Anything?” he asked in a hushed whisper.

“There’s a crash site just over the ridge, a few days old at least. I found these,” he held up an iron ball attached to a length of severed rope - clearly once part of a set of bolas. “No sign of the Night Fury though.”

Both men turned sharply at the sound of footsteps behind them. Spitelout stepped out of the shadows and joined them beneath the boughs.

“What are we doing here, Stoick?” he asked in a gruff whisper. “The girl was clearly making up stories.”

“You didn’t see her with the Nadder,” Stoick replied. “The thing was meek as a housecat around her. There’s something going on here, and I plan to get to the bottom of it.”

“Maybe the girl found some way to control the beast,” he argued, “But the rest of her story? I’m not sure which part was more unbelievable: the Night Fury transforming Hiccup into one of them, or that he managed to shoot it down in the first place.”

Stoick’s eyes narrowed minutely. His son may have been, well, Hiccup, but he wasn’t as stupid as much of the village believed. He kept his glare fixed on Spitelout slightly longer than the other man was comfortable with before he spoke.

“This is Astrid we’re talking about, Spitelout. What happened with Finn was unfortunate, but she’s the best Viking of her generation, we both know it.” Secretly, he’d been waiting for Hiccup to mature - at least a little bit - before arranging a marriage contract with Balder Hofferson.

“You heard how she fought in the raid,” he continued, “She was certain to win Dragon Training and reclaim her family honour; why would she give that up unless she was telling the truth?”

Stoick’s father had told him that there were two types of chief: those who can’t tell when a man lies to him, and those who reach old age. The girl hid it well, but he’d seen the fear in Astrid’s eyes when she spoke to the council, and heard the desperation in her final pleas; she was telling the truth, he was certain of it.

“What if she was cheating in the ring?” Spitelout retorted, “We know she has some way to control the beasts.”

“In battle too? That’s enough, Spitelout.”

“But-”
“I said, *that’s enough!*” he snapped, barely managing to keep his voice at a whisper.

“Yes chief,” Spitelout spat, retreating back to his position in the line.

*I shouldn’t have done that,* Stoick thought.

Regardless of whether or not he believed Astrid’s story, deep down, in the core of his being, he refused to accept that his son was dead.

*Gods in Asgard,* he thought. *I know I’ve been a bad father to him, but if he was gone I’d know it, I’d feel it.*

...*Wouldn’t I?*

Hoark shuffled nervously beside him. Stoick’s mind snapped back to the present. *Get a hold of yourself, you’re on a hunt.*

“Anything else?” he asked.

“There’s a break in the trees and and a drop in the ground that way,” Hoark gestured off into the darkness, “It’s probably this ‘cove’ the girl spoke of, and there’s a crevice a few yards back, that looks like someone’s been through it several times recently. You may be able to slip a few men onto ground level that way.”

The chief nodded to the man, then raised his hand and signalled to the rest of the warband; *follow me, stay low.*

Stoick rose to a half-crouch and picked his way forwards, squinting against the darkness, watching for anything that would alert the dragons to his presence. He heard barely a rustle of undergrowth, or muffled clink of metal, as they slipped through the final ranks of trees and paused at the barrier of bushes protecting the rim of the cove.

Stoick’s heart pounded and his skin pricked - old battle instincts kicking in. He held up his hand for the men to halt, then dropped to the ground - ignoring the slight twinge of pain he felt from his back at the movement.

Hardly daring to breathe, he inched forwards, cringing at every noise the bush made as he pushed his way through. *Oh, to be twenty years younger...* he thought.

After nearly a minute of crawling and cursing silently, he broke through to the other side, and his breath caught in his throat.

Lying below him, their scales dully reflecting the silver moon, were two sleek dragons as black as the sky above. He breathlessly murmured a prayer to Thor as he stared down at the Night Furies - for what else could they be? With a start, he realised that they were awake, their attention solely on each-other. A low current of grunts and growls drifted up to him on the breeze.

Snapping himself free of the trance-like state of shock, he backed out of the bush and crept a few paces away from the edge before beckoning Spitelout and Hoark to join him.

“So?” His half-brother demanded. “Was this all a wild Terror chase?”

“No,” Stoick breathed, “They... they’re here.”

“They?”
Stoick mentally slapped himself. “Yes,” he said sharply, “Both Night Furies.”

Spitelout cursed under his breath, and Hoark’s hand went to an amulet of Mjolnir hanging from his neck.

Spitelout recovered a moment later. “So chief,” he began, “How are we doing this?”

Stoick rested his shield against a tree. While he thought, he ran his free hand through his beard, combing out the leaves and twigs it had picked up in the bush. “Do the men have ropes with them?”

“Of course.”

The corners of Stoick’s mouth twitched upwards - almost imperceptible beneath his beard. “Do you remember Outcast Island?”

Spitelout’s eyes brightened, some of his earlier irritation vanishing. “Aye Stoick, I’ll remember that until the day I die.”

“Hoark?” Stoick turned to the older man. The scout nodded back.

“You both know what you need to do.”

“Yes sir.”

“Aye chief.” Spitelout turned to leave.

“One more thing,” Stoick called him back. “Tell the men they are not to kill the Night Furies under any circumstance. We need them alive.”

“Stoick...” Spitelout began in a warning tone.

“That’s an order,” Stoick snapped. “Astrid said we need them to find the nest, so we’re taking them alive. Don’t make me tell you twice.”

Spitelout grumbled an affirmative, and span on his heel, stalking away into the night.

Stoick sighed as he bent down to pick up his shield. If it had been anyone other than Spitelout questioning his orders so brazenly, he would have had them mucking out the dragon cages for a month. Deep down, a small part of him wondered if his half-brother’s implications were true; despite his attempts to justify capturing the Night Furies, was he endangering the village by clinging to a desperate hope that his son, his Hiccup, might yet live?

Another bird-whistle cut through his thoughts; the men were in position. He drew his warhammer from his belt and gave it a few practice swings. Satisfied, he took a deep breath and blew it out between gritted teeth, shoving unnecessary thoughts and feelings to the back of his mind.

His warriors didn’t need Stoick Haddock, father of Hiccup; they needed Stoick the Vast, Chief of Berk.

“What Stormfly told you is true,” Muninn explained, “Yilbegān is the spirit of the third Alpha. Though they had five bodies, they were of one mind; their souls united by their power. My sire... he told me stories about the five who came together to become Yilbegān.” She turned her head skywards, eyes distant.
Hiccup followed her stare, gazing upwards at the gently twinkling points of light.

“First,” she began, “There was Zarolith. Every female hatchling wanted to be like her, bravest of the Five. It is her light that appears at sunrise and sunset, reminding Koyash that Yilbegän is always watching.

“Then there was-” She stopped suddenly, ear-fins shooting straight up.

“What is it?”

“Listen!” she hissed.

Hiccup bit back his reply, focusing on the sounds around him.

Silence.

“I don’t-” Then it hit him; he couldn’t hear anything. A moment ago, the night had been alive with the sounds of nocturnal creatures.

Hiccup opened his mouth, but before he could speak, the silence was shattered by a ferocious roar.

The shout struck him like a physical blow. Light flashed before his eyes. He staggered, almost drunkenly, to his feet. He sunk his claws into the soil and shook his head rapidly, fighting to clear his vision.

There were Vikings everywhere. Standing on the clifftops surrounding them. Climbing frantically down ropes that had appeared from nowhere. Hiccup’s ears rang, the echoing shouts pounding at his head again and again. Another chorus of screams joined the cacophony. Hiccup spun around to see a knot of men charging out of the crack in the cliffs, brandishing weapons over their heads as they pelted across the grass.

“Fly!” Muninn screeched.

Woosh! Thwack!

Hiccup turned in time to see Muninn fall back to the ground, her wings tangled in a set of bolas. Behind her, the warriors on ropes dropped the last few feet onto the grass. The men already on the ground were nearly on top of him. Hiccup didn’t move, his eyes locked on a pair of heavy, booted feet that landed in the mud on the far side of the cove.

His gaze travelled up, past the boots, and the mail skirt above them, to the ornate studded belt, then the green tunic, the oversized brooches at his shoulders, the fiery beard, and finally, the hate-filled green eyes.

“Dad,” he whined.

A sword whistled through the air. As he leapt out of the way, he recognized the man with a graying beard who swung it; Hoark. The men from the ropes rushed forward.

“No, no, no,” he whimpered.

An axe swung at him. He leapt backwards.

“Please,” he gasped.

He ducked a hammer blow. His tail brushed against the cliff wall.
“No,” he pleaded, “Not again.”

A man lunged forwards, swinging a sword Hiccup had straightened not two weeks earlier. Hiccup tried to dodge, but he had nowhere to go. The blow caught him on the outside of his foreleg.

Fury and agony blazed through him. He snapped his head to the side and fired at the offending Viking. The man caught the shot on his shield, but the blast threw him and the men beside him backwards.

He pounced on the opening, lunging forwards, snapping at the men around him. They danced out of his way. He roared, spinning about and leaping over their heads onto the men still trapped in formation. One of them went down beneath him.

His head darted downwards, teeth unsheathed, ready to open the Viking’s throat. In a flash, Hiccup recognised the man beneath his claws; Spitelout.

He couldn’t.

As much as his cousin had made his life miserable, he knew what it was like to live without a parent.

A great weight crashed into his flank, sending him staggering to the side. Before he could recover, another weight landed on his back. His claws slipped in the mud, and he sprawled onto his stomach.

The Vikings roared, and more bodies piled onto him, driving the air from his lungs. A pair of hairy arms clamped around his muzzle, forcing his jaws closed. His wings throbbed, pinned painfully to his back. He couldn’t breathe. What little air he managed to get burned with the stench of human.

Hiccup panicked. He thrashed madly, snarling through clenched teeth in primal terror, his efforts only managing to excavate a crater in the mud beneath him. All the while, his father stood a few paces away, watching impassively.

Then a warhammer struck him in the temple and he saw no more.

Chapter End Notes

Mythology:
Huginn and Muninn - A pair of ravens that fly all over the world and bring information back to Odin. Their names derive from the Old Norse for “Thought” and “Memory”. 
Chapter Notes

Retcon Alert: If you haven’t read chapter 11 recently, you may want to go back and re-read it, as I’ve added some additional dialogue between Astrid and Stormfly. In short: Astrid now knows that Stormfly forgot her original name and chose to go by the name Astrid gave her.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 14: Armistice

Hiccup hurt. He lay at an awkward angle, causing painful cricks in his neck and back. His wings ached from too long spent pinned to his body. Worst of all, his head throbbed in time with his pulse; every beat of his heart felt like the banging of a great war-drum beside his ear.

He couldn’t breathe properly. Something was wrapped around his muzzle, constricting it. He absently raised a forepaw. Before he could reach his snout, his claws struck something solid.

The memories rushed back; the cove, being ambushed by his father. His eyes shot open.

Above him, the first light of dawn brightened the clouds. Between him and freedom hung a net of thick black iron chain.

Hiccup shot to his feet. In a flash he took in the grey stone walls and floor, the heavy reinforced doors, and the Night Fury tied to a cart in front of him. With a sense of dread, and rising panic, he realised where he was;

The Kill Ring.

The predawn silence was broken by distant voices. Hiccup couldn’t make out their words - his head still rang from the hammer blow - but he could tell they were getting closer. He instinctively tried to spread his wings.

Cold! He tried to rear, but his collar struck something behind him, and he stumbled forwards. He backed up a half-step, before the thick wooden ring around his neck stopped him.

Panic rose in him and he pulled back frantically, muscles straining as he jerked against the restraints.

The cart rocked and chains rattled, but held firm.

Think! Hiccup forced himself to still, and to breathe as deeply as he could through his nostrils. These carts were built to contain Monstrous Nightmares; he wasn’t going to get out using brute force.

He looked over at Muninn. Much like the people that built it, the design of the cart was simple and sturdy. Two iron bars looped over her back - the icy chill of the metal had startled him earlier - and a large wooden collar - more of a yoke, really - was clamped around her neck. It’s sides were wide enough to stop her backing out of the contraption, while three chains secured it to the front of the
The clasp and hinge of the yoke were weak points, Hiccup thought; but there was no way he could reach those. If he could get the muzzle off, he could hit the anchor points of the chains with his fire. However unless he wanted to use a blast at point-blank range, he’d have to melt them, which would take time.

The arena gate clanked open. Hiccup froze. His eyes locked on his father, but all he saw was Stoick’s emotionless stare the night before - as if watching a merchant display his wares - while his son fought in the mud before him. A muffled whimper crept out through his muzzle.

“So,” Gobber began, standing beside the chief. “You’re telling me you actually believe the lassie’s story, and one of these beasties is our Hiccup?”

Stoick simply glared at him.

“Right, glad we cleared that up,” the smith continued. “Any idea on how we’re meant to tell which one?”

“Astrid said the other one was female.”

Gobber nodded. “Anything else? You know, something we could use?”

Stoick rounded on him. “Bork was your kinsman, I’d have thought you...”

... better than I ever did. Hiccup finished.

“You’re the master of dragon training,” Stoick reminded him, “And you knew the boy...”

“Your expert opinion, if you please, Gobber.”

“Aye chief,” Gobber muttered. His brows furrowed and he habitually stroked his moustache as he thought.

“That one,” he said eventually.

And pointed at Muninn.

“He’s bulkier than the other one,” Gobber explained. “According to the men, he fled when you attacked, the other one tried to fight - damn near killed Spitelout before they brought it down.”

No! Gobber it’s me! Hiccup wanted to shout. He rattled his chains and strained his jaws against the leather binding them, to no avail. Stoick took a deep breath, and with the air of a man heading to his execution, slowly walked over to Muninn.

Metal clanged behind his head. Hiccup winced and let out a small whimper; the ringing steel just behind his ears pierced straight through him. He looked to the side, Gobber was stood there, his hook poised threateningly over the bars encircling him.
“Quiet down you devil,” he growled. “Don’t you think you’ve hurt him enough already?”

Hiccup stared up at his former mentor. *Come on Gobber,* he begged, willing him to realise his mistake. *You practically raised me; can’t you see it’s me?* There was no sudden flash of recognition, only a grim, hateful sneer.

With a silent moan he sank down onto the cart.

Stoick Haddock heard his heart pounding heavily in his ears, and felt sweat collecting on his forehead as he crossed the ring. He stopped several paces away and looked down on the Night Fury.

It was strange; with all the mystery and superstition surrounding it, he had expected a hulking, monstrous beast of legend. Instead, he’d personally killed Nadders larger than the ‘offspring of lightning and death itself’.

“Not so fearsome when your foes can see you, are you?”

The Night Fury’s eyes were pointed in his direction, but they seemed unfocused, like they weren’t really seeing him. Stoick studied its - no, his - features, looking for something, anything that reminded him of his son.

All he saw was the face of the enemy that had taken his wife.

“Oh, Hiccup...” he mumbled into his beard. The ... things on the side of the dragon’s head twitched. Stoick coughed. “Son...” he began.

The Fury raised his head from its awkward position resting on the collar, and *glared* at him, it’s pupils narrowed into tiny black slits. A furious hiss issued from his muzzle.

Stoick instinctively stepped back. He clenched his fist at his side, fighting the urge to draw his weapon. He met the dragon’s stare with his own.

“Hiccup...” he tried. Words failed him again. He desperately searched those toxic green eyes for any trace of his son.

*What do I want?* He wondered.

After that terrible day, so long ago, when Val was taken, he’d thrown himself into his work as chief. For a time, his life had consisted solely of supply inventories and plans for the coming year - anything to keep the grief at bay. Eventually, it became his reason for being; *protect the village, make them strong, make sure no one else suffers your loss.*

Now, he held the key to finishing his life’s work, and part of him wished he could throw it away, just so he could have his son back.

The Night Fury’s cold reptilian eyes bored into his own, full of wrath.

Only Loki, of all the gods, could be this cruel; answering a prayer in such a way as to make you wish you never uttered it.

“Why did you do it? Why did you attack Dökkhöfn ?”

The Night Fury before him didn’t react.
“Damn it, they were your kin!” That was the worst of it. They wouldn’t know the full extent of the carnage until the ships sailed again come springtime, but there were at least a dozen families on Berk with ties to the Meatheads. If only Hiccup and the other Night Fury hadn’t been so damned destructive, he could have argued with the council for keeping him for training, or to sell to dragon trappers. But no, now his people were out for blood, and if he stood in their way, they would turn on him.

Still, the Night Fury remained impassive.

“Why, Hiccup?”

No response.

“Do something, damn you!” Stoick roared. The creature in front of him flinched, and for a moment he saw bestial terror flash in his eyes. Stoick’s anger left in a rush. He felt cold.

He glanced up at the sky. Oh gods, Val, what do I do?

Forcing down his pride, Stoick lowered himself to one knee and looked the dragon that was his son in the eyes. “Hiccup,” he forced out. “Son, I’m sorry. Not just for... this,” he gestured to the cart and the chains enclosing them. “I should have been there for you. After Val... It was...”

He took a shuddering breath. “I can help, but I need you to show me its still you in there, please...” he extended a shaking hand towards his muzzle.

The Night Fury jerked away and snarled at him.

For a moment, Stoick was back in his burning house, watching his love disappear into the dark and smoke.

He swayed on his feet. “You’re not my son,” he gasped out.

The leather grip of his sword creaked beneath his fist - he didn’t remember reaching for the weapon. “My son was a Viking,” he growled, rising to his full height. “I raised him to never betray his blood, not to fall for the wiles of a demon queen!”

“Stoick.”

The chief whirled. Spitelout stood by the arena entrance. “What?!”

“The fleet’s ready to sail, chief.” As he spoke, Spitelout kept his gaze fixed on the far wall. Stoick wasn’t sure how much his half-brother had seen; but the man knew enough to not say anything.

“Good,” he nodded. “Gobber! Meet us on the docks. Bring both of them.”

The smith gave him a long look, something that may have been pity in his eyes.

Stoick span and marched off before he could respond.

I’m sorry, Val.

The chill wind heralded winter as it whistled over the clifftops of Berk, slicing Astrid to the bone. She paid her discomfort little notice; she watched the docks below, where her people prepared to sail to their doom.
Ragnar Ingerman and his shipwrights had worked through the night to make a pair of longboats, damaged in the summer, seaworthy. The rough cut planks stood out even from her position on the clifftops. The ships would be slow, and the unseasoned wood wouldn’t last a season in the water, but they would carry their passengers to Helheim’s gate.

_And into the jaws of the Queen_, Astrid thought.

Despite the shipbuilders’ heroic efforts, the majority of the warriors were packed into fishing ships, their hulls pushed dangerously low in the water by the weight of men and steel packed into them. Somewhere amongst the organised chaos below was the Sjóknapa, and onboard, her parents.

She watched as Hiccup and the Night Fury were wheeled down the ramps, and hoisted onto the longships. One of them - she couldn’t tell which at this distance - panicked as they were lifted, bucking against their restraints, causing them to swing wildly through the air.

She replayed the last precious minutes with her parents in her mind, trying to commit it to memory. She had begged them not to go, but, as she knew they would, when the call came to ready the ships, they obeyed; As warriors they were honour-bound to follow their chief, even to the grave.

At last, the Night Furies were secured, and the chieftain's horn was sounded. The two longships unfurled their sails, and lead Berk’s fleet between the sentinel statues, out on the Hooligan tribe’s last great raid.

Astrid stood there, ignoring the cold creeping into her limbs, until the final ship shrunk to a speck, and at last vanished over the horizon.

Her Uncle’s words - those she had echoed to Stormfly less than a day ago - taunted her.

_When we are knocked down, we have two choices; we can roll over and admit defeat, or we can grit our teeth, get back up and fight._

_What was the point of getting back up? She asked herself, when all it does is give the enemy a chance to knock you down harder?_ What was it the southerners said? Something about discretion being the better part of courage?

_It’s all so messed up, _she thought. What had compelled her to follow Hiccup into the woods that morning which felt so long ago? And then, when she witnessed him transform into a Night Fury...

“I should have just left him to starve.” It wasn’t like much of the village would’ve - _had_ - missed him.

“So, why didn’t you?”

Astrid spun around. “Orvar? What are you doing here?”

“Ma and Pa went with the ships, so I...” her little brother trailed off. “Why did you do it, sis?”

She sighed. “He’s the chief’s blood, Orvy. We may not like him, but it’s our duty to protect him all the same.”

He nodded seriously.

She turned her back to him, staring out towards the horizon. “At first,” she began, “I was just helping Hiccup.”
“How did you know he was still, you know, him?”

“I had my suspicions after he was transformed,” she explained. “The next day, I found him in the forest and he proved it by writing runes in the dirt.” She took a breath. “He was Stoick’s heir, and he was starving. I couldn’t leave him like that.”

In the distance, a gap in the clouds cast brilliant rays down on the ocean. Any other day, she would have taken it as a sign of hope.

“He was the first to find out,” she continued. “One of the Queen’s dragons, a Nadder, found him. Hiccup killed her-” she heard a sharp intake of breath from Orvar. “-and with her dying breath, she told him that the dragons are just as much victims in this war as we are; that the Queen forces them to fight us.

“The next day, I met Stormfly in the ring.”

“Stormfly?”

She laughed humorlessly. “The training Nadder. Of course, I didn’t give her that name until later that night.

“At the end of the bout, I slashed her wing pretty badly.” She felt a fresh pang of guilt, remembering how she’d nearly crippled the dragon who’d saved her and Hiccup time and time again. “Afterwards, I couldn’t stop thinking about what I’d done to her, and what Hiccup had told me; that Stormfly was just an innocent victim.

“You heard what happened next. I went back to her, she let me treat her wing, then sheltered me when the storm hit.” She glanced back at her brother. “I nearly died in that Storm, Orvar, but Stormfly, she sheltered me beneath her wings, shared her warmth with me; the very person who’d mutilated her that morning.

“After that…” she sighed again. “It wasn’t just about Hiccup any more. Stormfly took me flying with her - it’s incredible Orvar! The freedom! I can’t describe it!” Her tone sobered. “Then the Raid came.”

She paused, remembering the screams, and the flames that had claimed so many lives.

“Stormfly saved Hiccup’s life twice that night. We spoke after the battle, and-”

“Wait, you spoke to Stormfly?”

“Yes, in a way. She understands Norse, Hiccup understands her, and can write Norse.”

“Oh, wow.”

“I knew then that we had to kill the Queen. Ending the war is the only way to save Berk, and...” she hesitated. Yes, she told herself, this is right. “...freeing her kin is the least I can do to repay the life-debt I owe her many times over.”

Orvar went quiet. She turned her gaze back out to sea. Time passed. Eventually, in a thin, wavering voice, her brother asked “Are Ma and Pa really going to die?”

She turned to face him. “I...” What could she say? That there were countless more dragons than he’d seen in his short life packed into the mountain? That the Queen was a monster spawned from the depths of Muspelheim? That the tribe was sailing towards them with no idea what they were
about to face?

Eventually the reason for her hesitation dawned on him. She saw the tears build up in his eyes, before a wordless sob escaped him and he lurched forwards, wrapping his arms around her.

“Be brave,” she told him, awkwardly returning the embrace. “Yes, there are a lot of dragons at the nest, and the Queen is very strong, but Ma and Pa are great fighters, and they’ve got the rest of the village with them. They’ll come back, you’ll see.”

“No!” Orvar sobbed into her tunic. “They’re all going to die! Stop them, sis, please!”

It felt like he’d plunged a dagger into her heart. She felt tears of her own gathering. *I couldn’t even keep one dragon safe, how do you expect me to save all of Berk?*

Footsteps pounded rapidly against the boards. *Not now,* Astrid thought, looking up.

Ruffnut skidded to a stop a few paces away, red-faced and panting.

“Astrid!” she gasped.

“Ruff! What are you still doing here?”

“Spitelout kicked us all off the raid,” she explained between gasps. “He said that since you turned traitor, the rest of us couldn’t be trusted either.”

Astrid scowled.

“His words, not mine!” she exclaimed quickly.

“What do you want?”

“It’s Snotlout,” she explained. “He didn’t take it well; he’s got it into his head to prove himself by killing the Nadder in the ring.”

Astrid’s breath caught in her throat. *Stormfly!*

“He’s going to get himself killed,” Ruffnut continued. “Please Astrid, if what they said about you is true; if you have some way of controlling that dragon, please, save him.”

For a moment there was quiet; no sound but the whistling of wind and lapping of waves. Ruffnut stared at her, desperate and pleading.

“Ow! Sis!” Orvar squeaked. “Can’t breathe!”

Astrid looked down at her brother; she’d unconsciously tightened her grip on him. She let go and turned to Ruffnut.

“If that idiot manages to hurt my dragon,” she growled, “I’ll kill him myself.”

With that, she set off in a sprint towards the arena.

Behind her, Ruffnut uttered a dramatic sigh and took off in pursuit.

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The jury-rigged longship battered its way through the swell. It met every wave with a sudden jerk, then a great splash as it forced the water to part, and finally a sharp drop into the trough on the
The ship was flanked by a pair of fishing boats. Not designed for sailing in open ocean, and heavily laden with men and materiel, they rocked precariously in the waves. The only thing keeping the vessels afloat was that the sheer number of men packed onto them could bail out faster than the water came in.

The ship struck a particularly steep wave, and lurched violently. Hiccup’s stomach flipped. He screwed his eyes shut and clenched his jaws, fighting the urge to throw up. He really didn’t want to vomit while wearing a muzzle.

_Oh, the gods hate me_, Hiccup moaned. In the few short days since he gained his flight, he’d twisted and turned his way through the air in every way imaginable, without once feeling queasy. Yet, despite the seas being mild for the time of year, his stomach had turned as soon as they’d left the harbour.

“We meet again,” Stoick murmured - his voice carrying from the prow to Hiccup’s sensitive ears. “You can burn our homes, kill our friends, but we will not be quelled so easily.” Hiccup saw the horns on his helmet shift as he glanced upward, and spoke in prayer. “Odin Allfather, we dedicate the coming battle to you, and ask your blessing in return; grant us victory this day.” Then, in a booming voice that rang out across the waves, he called out “Hard to port!”

The fleet swung about - leaving Hiccup’s stomach behind. Slowly the fog banks of Helheim’s Gate were dragged into view, bringing with them a wave of dread and icy fear. He instinctively pressed himself down onto the boards beneath him, pulling his wings tighter against his back.

Muzzled and bound, he could do little more than watch in horror as everyone he’d ever known sailed into the jaws of death.

Then, silence; complete, unearthly silence, as they passed into the Queen’s realm. Even the seas themselves cowered in fear of the presence at the heart of the mists.

“Sound your positions, stay within earshot.” Stoick barely raised his voice, but his words carried across the water like a shout.

“Here.”

“One length to your stern.”

“On your starboard flank.”

Gobber hobbled up to the prow of the ship. “Listen... Stoick... I was overhearing some of the men just now and, well, some of them are wondering what it is we're up to here...”

His voice faded into the background as a low chattering echoed through the mists. Hiccup’s ear fins twitched.

_Invaders come. Return to the nest, my flock._

He half-rose to his paws. He was in danger. He needed to-

Auric light flared within. Icy energy surged.

He snapped to like he’d been hit with a bucket of seawater. He found himself staring off into the mists, in the direction of the nest. He tore his gaze away, forcing himself to stare at the wood
beneath his claws, but still he felt her power tugging at him, pulling him towards the nest.

The chattering echoed through the mists again, and with it came the Queen’s voice.

*I know you are there, Yilbegän’s child. I will not hold a grudge, all you need do is come back...*

*Come back...* her words seemed to echo in his head. His eyes unfocused, and his gaze drifted up, over the side of the boat, towards...

*No!* He screwed his eyes shut, concentrating on the brilliant spark of light within. *Focus Hiccup, keep her out...*

The flock called again. His ear-fins fluttered in response.

“Shush,” Stoick ordered, cutting off Gobber’s rambling.

*Why do you fight me? The Queen whispered. Don’t you see it’s hopeless?*

Hiccup’s eyes blinked open. *She’s right, isn’t she?* What, after all the pain and suffering he’d endured, had he actually accomplished? He’d sent close to a dozen innocent dragons to their deaths, all to give Muninn a brief taste of freedom, before cruelly snatching it away and delivering her back to the Queen.

His and Stormfly’s grand dream of building a secret flock was just that; a fantasy. There was no way they could escape the Queen’s sight long enough to build a force that would stand against her.

Stoick pushed through the warriors crowded on the deck and stood before him. He glared down at him with eyes full of pure, unbridled hate; eyes that pierced to his very soul. Hiccup was no stranger to his father’s disapproval, but there was no love, no compassion, no pity; nothing human in the face that looked down upon him.

His ear-fins flared. He felt the Queen probe his mind.

*They don’t deserve you,* she whispered. *Lead them to me, and I will set you free, then burn them all.*

“Step aside.” Stoick moved past him, heading for the steering oar at the back of the ship.

A gentle wave struck the ship, and his stomach twisted again. He blinked; he hadn’t noticed his gaze drifting up towards the nest.

“Lead us home, devil,” Stoick growled.

Alone, sick, and tired - *so tired* - of fighting, Hiccup did exactly that.

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Again, Astrid found herself running headlong through the village. Before she had thought it quiet; now, though, it was truly, deathly, silent. Between the black patches of ground where houses had once stood, and the abandoned building sites, homes stood empty; their doors hanging open, their windows dark, no fires burning in their hearths.

She sprinted down the main street, and pounded across the bridge connecting the mainland to the training arena. She skidded to a stop on a slight rise, overlooking the ring. It seemed everyone left was pressed up against the bars encircling the arena.

Astrid’s heart sank. She was too late.
There was a flash of fire in the ring, followed by a familiar screech.

_Stormfly_

She rushed forwards. She couldn’t just stand by. She needed to get in the ring; she had to-

A gnarled wooden staff blocked her path. “Where do you think you’re going, girlie?”

She looked up. Straight at Mildew’s twisted face. She barely resisted the urge to spit in it.

“Stoick gave us special instruction to keep you away from the dragons.” Another older villager stepped up, hand resting on a worn hilt at his belt. The man didn’t visit the village much, but she recognised him as one of Mildew’s complainers.

Astrid ground her teeth in frustration. The gate was right there! Through the bars, she could see Snotlout and Stormfly circling in the middle of the arena. The Jorgenson boy hunkered behind a scorched wooden shield, clutching his sword in a white-knuckle grip.

“Run along girlie,” Mildew drawled. “We wouldn’t want an _accident_ to happen before Stoick gets back, would we?”

Astrid barely registered the threat. At that moment, Snotlout bellowed and charged. Stormfly’s tail whipped. Snotlout caught her spines on his shield, then dropped to his knees, slashing her leg as he slid past.

Stormfly _screamed_. Snotlout stood, his sword dripping red. The crowd cheered.

Astrid moved before she registered the impulse. She grabbed Mildew’s staff and wrenched it from his hands. She spun, bringing the wood up just in time to catch the second guard’s sword. She whipped the heavy end of the staff into his temple.

“Help!” Mildew cried “Somebody- Oof!” The old man crumpled as she brought the other end of the staff up between his legs.

Astrid exhaled a quick puff. Both guards had gone down in the span of a single breath. Adrenaline still flooding through her, she took in the situation. Over the clamour of the fight, the crowd hadn’t heard Mildew’s shout.

However, one person had. She saw Snotlout’s eyes dart sideways and widen as they saw her standing, staff in hand, over the two men. Stormfly took advantage of his distraction and barrelled into him. Snotlout flew across the arena and landed heavily on his back. The enraged nadder pounced on him, pinning his chest beneath her uninjured foot.

Eyes narrowed into feral slits, Stormfly lowered her head and hissed furiously in his face, before slowly raising her neck.

Astrid saw what was about to happen, and for an instant, she wished she could let it. But she knew what she had to do.

“Stormfly, No!” she yelled, jamming the point of the staff beneath the portcullis and heaving . The gate levered up an inch. That was enough. She lunged forwards, grabbing the bars, and threw it open the rest of the way.

The staff clattered on the stone behind her, abandoned, as she rushed across the arena.
Her Nadder turned away from Snotlout for a moment. Her pupils widened slightly as she focused on her.

“It’s okay Stormfly,” she murmured, stepping to the side - to avoid the blind spot - and slowly extending her arm. As she reached for her Nadder’s muzzle she glanced at the crowd, and spoke up. “This fight is over.”

Snotlout snorted, and shoved at Stormfly’s foot. The Nadder’s head snapped back to him, eyes narrowed and hissing furiously. A quiet groan escaped the Jorgenson as the dragon’s weight bore down on him.

Astrid spared him a moment’s glance. He looked pained, but alive. “Keep still!” She focused back on her Nadder, taking a cautious step forwards. Stormfly dropped into a crouch, mantling her wings, concealing Snotlout from view. Her narrowed eyes locked onto Astrid, a constant low hiss escaping her jaws.

For a moment, the old Astrid resurfaced; she recognised the clearly enraged Nadder before them and screamed at her to flee. No, Astrid let out a slow breath. This was her Stormfly, her friend. She held her ground.

Remembering their first meeting, Astrid slowly stepped to her Nadder’s side. Her dragon’s tail swung around, creating a thorny barrier between them. Not taking her eyes from her Nadder’s own, she slowly reached for the tail.

Her trembling hand brushed against one of the Nadder’s spines. She gently applied pressure. It resisted for a heartbeat, then folded down flat against the tail. Astrid let out a soft sigh of relief. “That’s it, girl” she breathed, smoothing down another spine. “It’s me. You told me you came back to protect me, remember?”

Stormfly blinked, her pupils expanding to their normal size. The aggression drained out of her posture. She let out a quiet croon, extending her neck towards her.

“It’s okay,” Astrid told her, placing her hand on her muzzle. “You were scared; I know you’d never hurt me.”

Stormfly hummed in appreciation, then broke the contact. She raised her wings and they looked down at Snotlout. He lay limp beneath Stormfly’s claws, staring up at them with wide eyes.

Astrid kicked his sword away from where it had fallen nearby. It skittered across the arena floor. “Don’t try anything stupid. Understand?”

He nodded mutely.

Astrid moved to stand beside her Nadder, resting a reassuring hand on her neck. “Let him up, girl.”

Snotlout scrambled to his feet, and made to break for the exit.

“Wait.” She eyed the blood spattering the ground, then held out her hand. “Your tunic.”

Snotlout looked back at them, not comprehending.

“Your tunic,” she repeated. “Give it to me.”

Snotlout glanced from her to Stormfly and back again, before yanking off his tunic and undertunic, dumping both garments in her hand.
“Now get lost.” Astrid growled.

Snotlout fled across the arena without looking back.

Astrid exhaled slowly, finally noticing the tense silence hanging over the ring. The audience consisted mainly of children and the elderly - those too young or too old to fight. A nervous muttering spread through them as grandparents shielded their charges behind them.

Astrid glanced at Stormfly. Blood still oozed from the cut on her leg; she needed to tend to the wound, but their favour with the crowd teetered on a knife’s edge.

Stormfly nuzzled against her for a moment, crooning softly, then tossed her head towards the crowd with a chirp.

Astrid understood. *I’m fine; do what you must.*

“I-”

“Astrid! What have you done now?!" She spun around at the pounding of footsteps from the arena entrance. “Why did we just pass Snotlout running like he was being chased by Hel her-” Ruffnut skidded to a stop at the threshold, seeing the gate open and her standing next to Stormfly. “... oh. ”

A half-formed idea of a plan swam into Astrid’s mind, and she pounced on it. She took a deep breath, then looked up at the crowd. “Please!” she shouted. “Listen to me!”

The muttering only grew in volume.

“Stoick’s life is in danger!”

That got their attention.

“The chief doesn’t know what he’s sailing into,” She told them. “But first, there’s something you need to see.” She looked back at Stormfly.

“The dragons, they’re not like you think.”

She glanced towards the entrance. Tuffnut had joined his twin in the passageway, along with Fishlegs and her brother. “Ruffnut, come here.”

The female twin visibly gulped.

Astrid turned and met her Nadder’s gaze. “It’s okay. Stormfly here won’t hurt you.”

Ruffnut hesitantly stepped into the ring.

“Stormfly?” she asked, stopping a few paces away.

“She doesn’t remember the name her parents gave her,” Astrid explained. “I call her Stormfly. She says she likes it.” Leaving Ruffnut to mull over the implications of her words, she knelt down beside Stormfly and dabbed at her leg wound with Snotlout’s woolen overtunic. The cut was deep, but had missed its intended target - the tendons running up the back of the leg. “Come here,” she told Ruffnut, holding out her hand. The twin didn’t move. “She’s hurt,” Astrid explained, looking up at her, and indicating Stormfly. “I need your help.”

Not taking her eyes of the dragon, Ruffnut slowly crouched down beside her. Astrid placed the wadded up tunic over Stormfly’s wound, then took Ruff’s hand and pressed it down on the
improvised pad. “Hold this here while I talk to the others, okay?”

Ruffnut nodded stiffly. Astrid saw her eyes widen in panic as she stood up and backed away. Hoping that she hadn’t just made a terrible mistake, she turned her back on the twin and met the eyes of the assembled population of Berk.

She took a deep breath, and began to speak.

“The dragons are not like you think,” Astrid repeated. “They’re intelligent, they understand Norse, and they’re not our enemy.” This drew a few murmurs of dissent from the crowd. “Their Queen forces them to fight us...”

Stormfly tuned her out, instead peering down at the human female crouched beside her. Her instincts told her to take wing, and find some quiet rock on which to lick her wounds in peace. However, Astrid needed her, and she seemed to trust this female, ... Ruffnut. So she stayed.

Stormfly took a deep breath of the human’s scent. Her odour wasn’t too dissimilar from Astrid’s. Beyond the commonalities of all human scents there were highlights of fish, salt, and steel that she suspected were shared by all Vikings of this tribe. The most prominent odor was the acrid stench of fear rolling off her - far more than Astrid had when she first opened her cage.

She snorted, ruffling a few loose strands of the Viking’s hair. The human fledgling jumped, letting out an involuntary squeak, and nearly dropped the fabric pressed against her leg.

“I bear you no ill,” Stormfly crooned. “So long as you stay your claws, I shall do the same.”

The human relaxed minutely, though she still kept her muscles tense and held the pad at arm’s length.

Stormfly sighed inwardly; it would be too much to hope that every human would be as receptive and quick to change as her Astrid had been. She looked over at her, feeling incredibly proud of and thankful for her human; in less than half a moon’s cycle, she had gone from being ready to kill her, to arguing her case to her people.

“... she’s a hundred times bigger than the biggest dragon any of you have ever seen,” Astrid continued, “and she has hundreds, maybe thousands of dragons with her. No Viking, no matter how brave, could hope to take the mountain alone. We have to stop Stoick before he reaches the nest, or if we’re too late, free Hiccup and the Night Fury; they’re our only hope of defeating the Queen.”

“Oh yes! I love this plan!”

Stormfly snapped her head up. The human fledglings lurking in the entranceway had finally built up the courage to step to the ring. At their head was a young Viking the spitting image of the one at her feet.

Siblings, Stormfly thought.

“You were wise to seek help from the world’s deadliest weapon,” the male in the lead announced. In a conspiratorial whisper he added “that’s me.”

Astrid stared at him, baffled.

“How are we going to catch up with Stoick though?” asked the largest of the trio. “He took all of
Astrid looked from the newcomers, to the reinforced doors lining the walls, then finally to Stormfly. Their eyes met.

“My wings are yours, my friend.” She shuffled her wings.

Astrid stepped closer and crouched beside her. “That’s enough Ruff, thanks.” She tore a patch from the woolen garment, then ripped the fledgling’s undergarment into strips and used them to bind the pad to her leg.

Astrid glanced up at her as she worked. In a whisper, she asked “If I let the dragons out of their cages, can you convince them to help us?”

Stormfly hesitated. She knew little beyond the species of those she was imprisoned with - the stone walls between their cells were too thick to enable communication.

She drew herself up to her full height. Now was not the time for doubt. Her friend and her Alphas needed her. She slowly bobbed her head up and down. She would try.

For the sake of all she knew and believed in, she would try.

Return to me, my kin. Invaders approach.

The call of the flock carried the Queen’s voice through the mists. Hiccup unconsciously echoed it, ear-fins flexing in time with his chattering. His head swung around, following the direction of her pull. A moment later, the ship beneath him lurched, turning to follow his stare.

As they passed through a narrow gap between two sea stacks, the mast struck something with a dull thunk. Hiccup tore his gaze from the way ahead long enough to glance upwards. The decapitated prow of a longship hung above them, wedged between the stone pillars. The tattered remains of her sails fluttered in the fickle breeze that coiled through the mist.

“Oh!” Gobber exclaimed. “I was wondering where that went.”

“That’s not very encouraging,” another Viking muttered.

Ahead, visible as shadows in the mist, the bleached skeletons of more ships hung from great stone gallows.

“Stay low,” Stoick murmured. “Ready your weapons.”

The ship immediately fell into a tense silence. Only the creaking of the ship and the near constant call-and-response of the dragons could be heard.

The ship jerked to a stop. Hiccup staggered forwards, nearly banging his nose on the deck. He looked up in time to glimpse a crimson tail vanish into a crack in the mountain. Hiccup blinked; the flock was silent, his mind clear. He instinctively backed up until his collar hit the bars restraining him.

“We’re here.” Stoick announced. In the sudden silence, the crunch of his boots landing on the gravel beach was louder than an avalanche.

Oh gods, Hiccup thought. What have I done?
Astrid moved swiftly around the arena, pulling the levers to unlock each cage in turn. There were four muffled clanks of distant mechanisms, and three doors cracked ajar.

Stormfly took a deep breath. “Stay calm my kin, and step into Koyash’s light.” She spoke in a clear, confident tone. “These humans mean you no harm.”

There was a metallic clatter behind her. She spun in time to see a green Terror dart out of a hatch set into one of the doors, her eyes sweeping the ring, taking in the unarmed humans and open gate.

“See ya, fireless ones!” she squeaked, and leapt into the air, bolting for the exit.

“Let them go!” Astrid shouted.

Stormfly snorted. ‘Fireless’ was a grave insult; it figured that would be the one scrap of the old world to survive the Queen. Enjoy your freedom, sister.

Her attention snapped back to the front as the largest gate began to open. The pillar of light shining between the great doors illuminated a flash of the red-scaled Nightmare within.

The human fledglings - even her Astrid - backed up towards the exit. Stormfly heard a scrape of metal as the male twin - Tuffnut? - made to pick up the abandoned sword from earlier.

“No,” Astrid told him, batting his hand away.

“I know you have been imprisoned for many seasons,” Stormfly told the Nightmare. “As have I. But I beg of you, please, for the sake of all our kind, listen to what I have to say.”

The Nightmare’s head emerged into the light. She saw his pupils contract, seeing the sun for the first time in Trinity knew how long.

“It wasn’t always like this for our kind; we weren’t always subjects to a tyrannical Queen. Long ago there were the three Alpha Species: The wise Bewilderbeast, the passionate Red Deaths, and the Night Furies, who watched over the others and ensured their rule was fair and just.”

Long, deadly wing-claws clacked against the arena floor as their owner prowled out of his cage.

“Alas,” Stormfly continued, a hint of nerves creeping into her voice. “The Furies failed in their duty, and that failure has cost us greatly. Do not despair though, for now they have returned to right their old wrong.”

She thought of how Hiccup had battled to protect her and Astrid in their flight from the Nest, and how when the Fury had ambushed them, he had told them to save themselves and faced her alone.

“They are true Alphas, and they need your help. They call to you for aid - will you answer?”

The Nightmare said nothing.

“If not for them, then think of our kin still trapped under her power, don’t.”

“Wait.” His voice was deep and rumbling; almost something felt rather than heard. “You’re her, aren’t you?”

Stormfly blinked. “Her?”

“The Singing Nadder.” He glanced to the side as the other dragons - a green Zippleback and a grey-brown Gronckle - pushed their way out of their cages. “After I was captured, I was taken to
Stormfly knew the place; she had spent many days there before being transported to Berk.

“By the time I arrived, I had begun to realise what the Queen has taken from us. The dragon in the cell next to mine told me not to abandon hope, that once we had been proud and free, and that they could be again.

“When I asked how he knew this, he told me he had first heard it from the previous resident of my cell, and him from another neighbour, and so on. They said that some time ago a Nadder had passed through who sung songs of this forgotten age. She bade all who would listen to defy the Queen by remembering and sharing her words.”

“Yes,” agreed the Zippleback. They spoke with an accent, extending the ‘s’ sound into a soft hiss. “We heard these tales also.”

“They told me the same as well,” affirmed the Gronckle.

“So?” Asked the Nightmare. “Are you her?”

“I...” All this time, someone had listened to her songs! “Yes, I am her.”

The Nightmare inclined his head. “You gave us hope where there was none to be found. Thank you. For that...” He looked to the other dragons, who bowed their heads solemnly. He lowered his muzzle, snout nearly touching the ground. “For that, we will answer your call.”

Stormfly was speechless. Those long dark days in her cell before she’d met Astrid, she’d kept herself going on the belief that somewhere a single dragon might remember a few scraps of her songs when the Queen fell. She’d never expected... this.

“T-thank you,” she spluttered out.

The three dragons raised their heads. “What should we call you, O singing one?”

She turned to the Zippleback. “Like you, I don’t remember the name my dam gave me, but...” She looked back at the human fledglings, who were watching with wide eyes and open mouths - even Astrid, who had seen her and Hiccup talk before. She beckoned her human with a tilt of the head. “... this one, Astrid, she calls me Stormfly.”

The dragons stiffened as she approached. Stormfly felt her tail-spines raise of their own accord. She shifted slightly, ready to jump to Astrid’s defence.

Astrid paused just out of their reach. “It’s okay,” she told them. “I won’t hurt you.”

The Nightmare eyed Astrid for a moment. “You told us the Night Furies had returned. Why are these humans so important?”

“The last Night Fury used her power to transform the child of their chief - the humans’ alpha - into one of her kind. The humans captured both of them and, at this moment, are sailing with them towards the nest.”

The Nightmare’s gaze snapped back to Astrid. A low growl rumbled in his chest.

“No!” Stormfly squawked, half-opening her wings. “We can’t hurt them! Hiccup may be a Night Fury now, but they used to be his people!”
The Nightmare ceased his growl, but didn’t take his eyes off Astrid. Her human’s gaze darted from his bared teeth to her and back again. The other dragons remained tense, watching the exchange with baited breath.

“Think about it,” Stormfly told him. “There’s only four of us - six if you count the Night Furies - we can’t take on the Flock by ourselves; we need their help.

“You know what it’s like to be freed from Her control,” she continued. “When the Queen falls, the whole nest will go through that. At that moment, would you rather Vikings be on our side, or out for revenge?”

“Very well,” The Nightmare relented, turning back to her. “We will bind our fate to these humans.”

Astrid exhaled suddenly. She looked up at Stormfly and rested a hand on her neck. “You just saved my life again, didn’t you?” She moved her hand, gently caressing her scales. “Thank you.”

Stormfly hummed, then lowered her head and nudged her human into the center of the group. Astrid looked back at her.

“Talk to them,” Stormfly chirped, gesturing from her to the dragons. “They want to help.”

Astrid glanced back and forth a few times before getting her meaning. “Okay...” She took a deep breath. Four pairs of reptilian eyes gazed back at her intently.

“We need your help.” She glanced back at her. “But Stormfly’s probably already told you that.”

“We need to stop Chief Stoick from reaching the nest, or if we’re too late, get Hiccup and the Night Fury off the boats. Stormfly and I can do most of it ourselves, but if we have to fight the Flock, we could use your help.” She paused, and beckoned over the human fledglings. “However, you’ll need to let one of us ride you.”

The three dragons jerked in surprise, but to Stormfly’s amazement, didn’t reject her plan outright.

“It’s for your own protection,” Astrid explained. “If you fly anywhere near the fleet by yourselves they’ll shoot you down without hesitation, but if you’ve got a Viking on your back, they should hold their fire long enough for us to explain ourselves.”

The Gronckle spoke up. “We’ll help you however we can, Stormfly.” She glanced at her companions. “But we can’t do what your human friend is asking. As soon as we get close to the nest, the Queen will take over us again.”

The Nightmare growled in affirmation. “I’ve lost too many years to her already.”

“Agreed,” hissed the Zippleback. “We cannot do this thing.”

“I understand your reluctance,” Stormfly said, looking at each of them in turn. “But what if there was a way to protect yourself from her influence?”

The three dragons stared back at her intently.

“I’m an Aurfýr” Stormfly announced. Seeing their confusion, she explained. “Yesterday, Astrid and I ventured too close too the nest, and the Queen pulled me back in.” She shuddered, remembering the feeling of looking out through her eyes, unable to act as she carried her friend to her death.
Absent-mindedly Astrid reached up and rested a hand on her neck. She hummed in thanks, and continued. “When we arrived at the nest, the Flock nearly killed Astrid; at the last moment I felt something stir within me.”

It had been so much more than those words conveyed; in her last moment before being torn apart, Astrid had looked to her. That gaze had sparked something deep within her, drawing it out, feeding it until the light blazed through her entire body. In the next instant, she was free, and there was no question what to do; she needed to protect her Astrid. And so she had.

Stormfly blinked, snapping back to the present. “They rarely feature in the songs, but it wasn’t just the Alphas who inherited the Trinity’s power. Some of their light passed into the blood of the common dragons, where, in one in every thousand thousand hatchlings, it would manifest. Some mockingly called these dragons ‘betas’ - as their power was a mere spark compared to the blazing light of a true Alpha - but, amongst their own, they were the Aurfyr.”

“Using the old power, I was able to free myself from the Queen, and escape the Flock with Astrid. If you fly with us, I can shield you from her control.”

The three dragons looked at each other.

“I say we do it,” The Nightmare growled. “We are already putting our faith in her. I trust that she’ll protect us when the time comes.”

The other two grunted in agreement.

Stormfly nudged Astrid and they stepped back. The three dragons turned to the human fledglings.

“There are four of them and only three of us,” The Gronckle pointed out. “Either we leave one behind, or one of us will have to carry two.”

Zippleback stepped forward, peering at the two long-haired fledglings. “Greetings,” they hissed. “You two look alike.” They inhaled audibly. “And smell similar too.”

“Yes,” Stormfly told them. “They’re siblings.”

“Siblings...” “Hmmm...”

The two heads looked at each other.

Astrid stepped around behind the Twins and grasped their wrists. “Stay calm,” she whispered, “And hold your hand out, palm forwards.” She slowly raised their arms to shoulder-level.

The Zippleback started, raising its heads and looking down on the humans warily. The twins tried to tug their hands away, but Astrid held them firm. “It’s okay,” she said, “They won’t hurt you.”

Stormfly wasn’t sure if she was talking to the Vikings or the dragon.

The three held their position. A second passed. Slowly, the Zippleback lowered its heads, touching their muzzles to the twins’ outstretched palms. The human siblings looked from the dragon to each other and back again, nervous laughter bubbling up within them. Unnoticed, Astrid let go of their wrists and slipped away.

“I want the Nightmare!” The littlest fledgling announced, stepping forwards and reaching for his muzzle.
Astrid’s eyes widened. “Orvar, wait!”

Stormfly tensed. This one was her human’s nestmate.

The Nightmare reared up to his full height and glared at the human. “Who are you to decide whom I shall carry, little one? You are not my master!” He finished in a roar, his hide exploding into flames.

Astrid lunged towards her brother. Stormfly crouched, ready to snatch both of them to safety.

As quickly as the flames appeared, they died. Orvar stood stock-still, unharmed, his hand still outstretched towards the Nightmare.

The crimson dragon snorted. “You have spirit, hatchling. You’ll do.” He bent his neck and tenderly touched the tip of his muzzle to the small human’s palm.

Stormfly let out a long breath through her nostrils, standing back up to her full height as she did so. She shuffled her wings - dispelling nervous energy - and eyed the Gronckle.

“Looks like it’s you and me, human,” the rock-like dragon said, ambling towards the largest fledgling.

“Uhh... hi,” he said. “I- Wait! Where are you going?!” His eyes darted between the approaching dragon and Astrid as she backed away towards the arena entrance.

“You know what to do.” Her human nodded to the Gronckle.

“You lot are going to need something to help you hold on.”

Astrid took a deep breath, and tugged on the ropes one more time. “Let’s do this, girl.”

Stormfly turned her head to the side and looked at her human, perched on her back. Despite the night in the cells and the fight that morning, the arrangement of fabric and ropes that Astrid sat on still held firm.

She chirped an agreement and stood to her full height, turning to face the dragons arrayed in a line behind them.

The early hours of the morning had slipped away as they figured out how to to get the fledglings onto the backs of the dragons, and how to keep them there in flight. There had been many minutes of clambering, limbs in uncomfortable places, and mimed conversations, but, at last, they were ready.

Stormfly glanced upwards through the bars enclosing the arena. Even after the earlier drama had been resolved and it became clear nobody was going to be killed, the crowds had hardly thinned. They remained, watching with quiet awe - and, Stormfly thought, a desperate hope.

Below the crowds four human fledglings sat astride their chosen dragons, held in position by simple loops of rope wrapped around their mount’s body.

“Remember,” Stormfly told the dragons, “We’re doing this to help the humans. Even if they fire at you, do not attack them! Listen to the ones on your backs, and follow mine and Astrid’s lead!”

On her back, Astrid was giving a similar speech to her kin. “…they’re not horses; the dragons will fly where they want to. If you want them to do something, speak! They can understand Norse as
well as you or I!”

“There’s one more thing...” the Nightmare said.

“Yes,” Stormfly briefly bowed her head to him. “I hadn’t forgotten.” She moved to stand directly in front of him. “I don’t know how long this will last, but it should stop her from pulling you in immediately.”

She took in a deep breath, and glanced upwards, searching for appropriate words.

“Trinity, grant us your blessing,” she intoned.

She bowed her head and touched the Nightmare’s muzzle. “May Ülgen’s foresight guide your wings.” As she spoke, she closed her eyes, focusing on the spark of power within her, letting it grow until it filled her. Then, she took hold of as much energy as she dared and pushed it into him, focusing on forming a shimmering sphere around his mind.

Her eyes shot open as the power rushed out of her. She blinked. Did it work?

The Nightmare bowed his head slightly. “Thank you,” he breathed.

She moved on to the next dragon in the line; the Zippleback. They touched both their heads to her muzzle. “May your fires burn with Koyash’s fury,” she spoke as she repeated the process.

Finally, the Gronckle; she touched her muzzle to her head and closed her eyes. “And should you fall, may Yilbegän’s Path stand open for you.”

She stepped back and looked each dragon in the eye. “We fly.”

“We fly,” they agreed.

She looked back at her human.

“Let’s fly!” Astrid shouted.

Stormfly turned and crouched in one motion. Spread your wings. Hold a moment. Then leap!

She shot through the entranceway on the wing. As she burst out the other side, she tilted her head back and screeched a fierce battle cry. The other dragons echoed her cry as they followed. A heartbeat later, the humans on the backs joined in. Finally, a few shouts of encouragement drifted up from the Berkians far below.

This is it, Stormfly thought, as they turned towards the nest. Whatever happens, this is the beginning of the end for the Age of Alphas.

Chapter End Notes

Pronunciation Guide:
Aurfýr - Rhymes with ‘fear’, not ‘fire’
Chapter 15: Regicide

Part 1: War

Stoick stood in the shadow of Helheim’s gate. Ahead of him lay fifty yards of bare ash and gravel, then the walls of the nest thrust upwards into an imposing bulwark of grey-black stone. The sea breeze kept the air breathable, but a faint sulphurous odour hung over the island.

Behind him was the largest host of warriors the Hooligan tribe had ever assembled.

He turned to Gobber, standing beside him. “Go find Spitelout and Phlegma. I want to go over the plan one more time.” The smith nodded and hobbled off to fetch the other two - who would be his lieutenants in the battle.

Stoick’s gaze drifted back towards the mountain as he waited. He had battled the dragons a hundred times before, but he felt his heart fluttering in his chest, and a cold sweat gathering on the back of his neck. So far, everything had gone to plan - they’d deployed off the boats without incident - but that just made his anxiety worse.

They hadn’t seen a single dragon since they’d landed.

Makes sense, the tactician in him whispered. They have a defensible position; no reason to give it up without a fight.

He eyed the crags lining the mountain side, feeling exposed on the barren shore. Were there reptilian eyes, hidden in the shadows, watching their every move?

That was the trouble; his people may have literally written the book on fighting dragons, but Bork’s treatises all started from the premise of defending an established position from a dragon attack. Nobody knew how to fight them on their own ground.


Stoick looked up; they were waiting for him. “Right.” He took a sword from Plegma and drew a line in the dirt, then a wide rectangle behind it.

“When we crack this mountain open, all Hel is going to break loose.”

“In my undies. Good thing I brought extras.”

Stoick sighed. “Thank you, Gobber.”

“If we’re going to win this, we need to control where the battle is fought.” He added a line of circles behind the rectangle. “So we’ll use the catapults to make a breach.” He drew an ‘x’ on the other side of the line. “The dragons will swarm out of the hole, straight into our archers’ fire.”

About a third of Stoick’s forces were equipped with bows. Few of them were properly trained, but if there were as many dragons in the nest as he feared, accuracy wouldn’t be a problem.
Gobber nodded. “Aye, as soon as we’ve made the breach, the catapults will switch to scatter-shot and support them.”

“Just make sure you leave some for the rest of us,” Spitelout growled.

“Don’t worry,” Phlegma shot back. “There’ll be enough left to gut you.”

“She’s right,” Stoick said. “The archers will thin their numbers, but most of the fighting will still be on the ground.” He drew three more rectangles, between the ‘x’ and the initial line.

“Spitelout, you’ll take the right.” He drew an arrow from the right-hand block, curling around towards the ‘x’. “Plegma, you’re on the left.” He did the same for her. “And I’ll hold the centre.” he drew a final arrow straight forwards.

“Push them hard,” he said, “We need to trap them in the breach as long as possible, but be careful you don’t end up in the archers’ line of fire. Understood?”

The three of them nodded.

“What about this ‘Queen’ the lassie warned us of?”

Spitelout guffawed.

Stoick silenced him with a glare. “If she shows up...we’ll cross that bridge when we get to it. Any more questions?

“Right. Good luck, and may we meet again in Valhalla.”

“Aye.”

“Yes, chief!”

“Aye, Stoick.” Gobber lingered a moment. “I’ll save a seat for you, old friend.”

“Me too, old friend.” Stoick replied, not meeting the smith’s eyes.

The chief clambered atop a nearby boulder and watched as Gobber made his way back through the lines, past the wooden palisade protecting the archers, to his position with the catapult crews.

“Ready!” His voice echoed in the sudden hush.

Stoick turned to face the mountain. He raised an open hand.

“No matter how this ends, this ends today!”

He clenched his fist.

A series of thunks echoed behind him as the counterweights were released. Then a creak as the catapults ponderously began their arcs. Finally, they accelerated with a whoosh. A half-dozen boulders flew through the air, sailing over the heads of the army and striking the nest with the force of Mjolnir.

The mountainside shattered.

Stoick ducked behind his shield as a cloud of dust rushed outwards, engulfing him and the first ranks. Shards of rock ricocheted off the wood, one pinged off his helmet.
As the wave of debris passed, he peeked over his shield. A section of the nest larger than the mead hall doors had collapsed, creating an opening into a yawning black cavern. Stoick tensed, waiting for the dragons to come rushing out.

Nothing moved, save for the swirling dust and a trickle of pebbles from the edge of the breach. Half-deafened by the rockfall, the beach seemed eerily silent.

Keeping his shield up, Stoick dropped down from the boulder and approached the gap. Attenuated by clouds and dust, the weak sunlight illuminated a haphazard mound of rubble in the mouth of the breach, but left the interior shrouded in darkness.

Switching his spear to his other hand, he drew his warhammer and held it to the side, then rotated it forwards. Behind him a catapult fired and a moment later, a blazing ball of oil-soaked rope roared overhead and into the breach. The light from the burning projectile shone on a cacophony of dragons in every size and colour, packed so densely he couldn’t see the walls of the cavern.

Stoick’s blood went cold. The light vanished from sight. A steady murmuring built within the nest. He raised his spear high and roared.

The Hooligans of Berk screamed their battle cries and charged.

The Flock took wing.

Stoick braced his shield as a Nightmare launched itself towards him. The dragon flew straight over his head. He blinked, missing a strike on a Zippleback that rushed past, buffeting him with its wings. Recovering, he thrust at a Gronckle as it buzzed him. He caught the beast on the leg, but it ignored him, flying headlong out of the nest.

Gobber shouted over the din, and the archers loosed a belated volley. Arrows whistled through the air as Stoick roared another battle cry, rushing forwards to meet the oncoming horde.

He jabbed his spear towards the exposed underbelly of a Nightmare. The creature jerked upwards, avoiding the point by mere inches. He spun, thrusting at the thigh of a passing Nadder. Blood sprayed him, but the creature continued on, charging through the breach. He swiped the spear in a wide arc - letting his hand slide down the haft for greater reach. A dull green Gronckle slipped sideways in mid-air, avoiding the attack. He brought the weapon back to his side to meet his next opponent-

And found himself standing in the mouth of an empty cave.

Heart pounding, Stoick turned to survey the beach behind him. A dozen dragons lay dead on the ground, arrows protruding from their chests. The rest had soared upwards, quickly escaping bowshot. Now, they were steadily winging their way away from the nest, joined by lines of dragons emerging from other cracks in the mountain.

“Is that it?!?” Somebody shouted.

Stoick tightened his grip on his spear. Something was wrong.

“We’ve done it!” Another voice announced.

A cheer spread through the men. A knot of fleeing dragons turned sharply and dove back towards them. Terror clutched at Stoick’s heart.
“No!” he yelled. “It’s not over!” The dragons were too close. They couldn’t reorganise in time. He shouted the orders anyway. “Form your ranks! Hold Together!”

Stoick the Vast could do nothing but watch as the dragons hit his formation from the side. They swept along the beach, following the palisade. Fire blossomed in their wake, followed by the agonised screams of burning men.

Around him, Warriors rushed to help their friends in the rear.

“No!” Stoick bellowed. “Keep your formation!”

It was too late; the already disorganised lines were thrown into chaos as men rushed forwards to help, while those near the fighting recoiled from the flames.

The reverberating sound of wings met Stoick’s ears.

He spun. Lights were visible in the darkness of the breach. It took him a moment to realise what they were; a dozen Nightmares, their scales lit with blazing fire.

Stoick sprinted for where the first rank had stood. “The nest!” He roared. “Form a wall!”

He grabbed the first person he saw and physically spun them to face the breach. He jerked their shield into position, overlapping with his own. “Wall!”

The warrior’s training finally kicked in. “Incoming!” she shouted. “Shield wall!”

More men rushed to their sides, joining on to the ends of the line. A wall of spears and shields slowly grew along the beach; too slow. Stoick watched helplessly as a man ran for the safety of their formation, only for a Nadder to drop onto his back - the creature’s claws punching almost completely through his torso.

A Nightmare swooped down towards them, mouth agape. “Brace!” Stoick shouted, ducking behind his shield. Behind him, a man raised his own shield to protect their heads.

A wave of liquid fire broke against the wall. He hissed through gritted teeth as a droplet flew through a gap between the shields and splashed on his shoulder. The ground shook as the Nightmare landed. The beast roared, then lowered its head and charged. Stoick, and the men around him, thrust their spears at it, bloodying its muzzle and forcing it back.

Stoick stood up to his full height - thankful that he towered over most men. Beyond the edges of his formation, all semblance of order had vanished. To the right of the line, dragons flew back and forth, chasing fleeing men.

He felt a sickening feeling in the pit of his stomach. His plan had relied on the force of their assault to break the dragons; they didn’t have the men for a long, bloody battle.

Stoick pushed the thoughts away; he had lead his people into this, it was his duty to get them out. To their left lay thirty yards of open ground, then another group of warriors trying to hold their own line. He turned to the man behind him - he was surprised to recognize him as Balder Hofferson. “Take my place.”

Balder nodded.

“On three. One... two... now!”
Stoick turned his body sideways and raised his shield above his head as Balder slipped past him, slotting seamlessly into the wall.

As soon as he broke free from the rear of the line, Stoick sprinted towards the second group of warriors. Above, a Gronckle dropped out of the air, using its bulk as a battering ram to shatter their line.

Stoick roared, pounding across the ash and gravel even faster. He charged headlong into the Gronckle, using his momentum to drive his spear deep into its flank. He let go of the haft and spun, whipping out his hammer in time to shatter the jawbone of a Nadder as it lunged for him. Before it could recover, another warrior stepped forwards and drove a sword through its neck. “Thanks chief,” she gasped.

A groan sounded at his feet. Stoick looked down to see a man lying in the grey dirt, knocked prone by the Gronckle’s impact. He held up a hand and Stoick clasped it, hauling him to his feet. “Are you hurt, man?”

The warrior clutched at his side for a moment, then straightened up. “I’ll live,” he croaked, turning to retrieve his weapons.

Stoick gestured back the way he came. “Get to the line,” he told the survivors. “We need to hold the front.”

He turned and yanked his spear out of the Gronckle. Blood spurted out of the wound, but the beast didn’t rise. He looked over his shoulder; the warriors lingered, staring at the chaos surrounding them with glazed expressions. Stoick felt for them; they’d all seen too many friends taken by claw and fire in recent days, but they couldn’t stop. Not here. Not now.

“Move!” He bellowed. “Go! I’ll follow you!”

The warriors snapped to attention and ran for the relative safety of the line. Stoick jogged behind them, one eye on the sky.

A shadow passed overhead. Stoick ducked, but the dragon hadn’t been targeting him. The zippleback swooped in front of the line exhaling a cloud of gas. It turned sharply and backwinded, dropping to the ground, and blowing the cloud through the wall.

Stoick ducked behind his shield at the last moment, but he still felt the percussive blast and heard the shouts of alarm become cries of agony.

“Retreat!” Someone screamed. “To the ships!”

Images of them trying to board the boats and push off in the midst of a storm of dragonfire flashed through Stoick’s mind.

“No!” He bellowed, stepping into the sudden gap. “NO! Hold your ground!”

As if in answer to his shout, a chorus of roars rang out behind him.

Horror gripping him, Stoick turned. A fresh wave of dragons dove out of the clouds and fell on the unprotected fleet, raking the boats with their fires. Flames blossomed on the horizon.

_Gods help us_, he thought. He’d been outplayed.

Astrid had tried to warn him. She’d seen the Queen, she’d seen ..., this. He’d ignored her for...
Now Berk stood, surrounded by enemies on all sides, watching their only hope of escape go up in flames.

*Gods help us all, I’ve been a fool.*

The mood had soured when Helheim’s gate first appeared on the horizon. After leaving Berk, the Twins, Fishlegs, and Orvar had whooped with the sheer exhilaration of flight. Despite the seriousness of their mission, Astrid didn’t begrudge their enjoyment - how could she, when she felt the same urge; to forget everything, and lose herself in the rush of the wind and the surge of Stormfly’s muscles beneath her?

Now though, as they plunged into the fog, the dragons drew into a tight formation behind Stormfly, flying steadily and silently.

Astrid shuddered, remembering her last time entering these mists; her Nadder stiff and unresponsive beneath her. She glanced at the other dragons; as far as she could tell, they were still themselves. Stormfly had broken free of the Queen’s control once, could she do it again? And what of the other dragons?

Had she made a terrible mistake bringing them here?

Stormfly looked back at her and crooned softly.

“Thanks,” Astrid murmured, leaning forwards to rest a hand on her neck.

Then they heard the screams.

It was the sound that had haunted Astrid’s dreams since the raid; the cries of men and women in agony;

The sound of people dying.

Stormfly and the others picked up speed without prompting. A chill that had nothing to do with the sea wind seeped into Astrid. She knew the chances had dwindled as Helheim’s gate approached, but she’d held out hope that they would be able to stop Stoick before he reached the nest.

But they were too late. They would have to fight. Six dragons against the multitudes of the Flock.

She listened to the screams in grim silence as they crossed the final distance to the nest.

Astrid’s first impression was of fire. For a single, terrifying moment, she thought the mountain had erupted. She couldn’t stop the horrified gasp that escaped her. The fleet was ablaze, the air thick with smoke. Dragons danced between the towering flames, spitting fire at any who dared approach the water.

Stormfly backwinged and rose quickly, circling above the smoke.

More dragons swarmed around the base of the nest. Pinned between the two groups, in a chaotic mass, were Berk’s warriors.

“Astrid!” her brother shouted. “What do we do?!”

She opened her mouth several times, but no words came out. “I...” *What did they do?* She doubted
even the valour of Týr himself would carry the day below. What could she - not even a Viking any more - hope to do?

“Sis!”

She mentally slapped herself. She was a Hofferson; they did not freeze in battle. She scanned the fires below. There! A glimpse of black between the flames.

She looked back to the trapped warriors, a Nightmare swooped low over their heads, raining liquid fire on the men below.

“‘Nuts, ‘Legs, Orvar, cover them; stop the Flock attacking from above. I’ll free the Night Furies.”

The riders nodded.

She crouched low as her Nadder dove towards the inferno.

Flames encircled Hiccup. They prowled around him like a pack of wolves, roaring and growling in low, crackling tones. The sail of his longship had caught in the Flock’s first pass, but, the rest of the vessel had escaped the lick of flame. However, the railings in front of him were already smouldering; the relentless blaze ever hungry.

He could feel the heat even through his scales; if he was still human it would have been unbearably hot. Smoke stung in his nostrils. He tried not to think about whether he would suffocate on it before the ship sank and dragged him down with it.

He heard the rushing of wings over the roaring flames. A Nadder burst through the black wall of smoke, trailing a column of daylight behind her. She backwinged hard - whirlwinds of soot and ember spiralling off her wings.

“Alpha!” Stormfly squawked, dropping onto the deck.

Astrid leapt off the Nadder’s back. “Hiccup!” she gasped, then immediately threw her arm across her mouth, coughing. “Is that you?” She wheezed, rushing over to him.

Hiccup nodded rapidly, resisting the urge to take a sudden gasp of air as she pulled off his muzzle.

“We need to get you out of here!” She cast around the burning deck, looking for a way to free him.

Hiccup looked up at Stormfly. “What are you doing?!”

“Fighting for the future of both our peoples,” she replied. “Astrid freed the other dragons from your arena, but we are only four; we need an Alpha.

“We need a Night Fury.”

But I’m not a Night Fury! Hiccup wanted to scream back. I’m a failure of a Viking, trapped in the wrong body! All I’ve done my entire life is get people hurt!

Astrid hissed through her teeth as she snatched up an abandoned sword. Hiccup winced, thinking of how hot the metal must be. She jammed it into the crack between the two halves of his yoke and heaved.

Hiccup thought of his childhood. Those long, miserable years; attempt after attempt, and public failure after public failure. He hadn’t built those inventions just to win fame and glory - sure, those
would have been nice - but deep down, he shared the desire of every child to live up to their father. This whole mess had started because he’d tried to help the village the only way he could.

The lock gave way. The wooden collar fell at Hiccup’s feet. He stepped out of the cart and spread his wings, slowly flapping to ease the stiffness.

“Hiccup...” Stormfly began.

He felt the omnipresent spark of Auric power within him. Now the gods - be they his father’s Æsir and Vanir or Stormfly’s Trinity - had granted him the ability to help. Who would he be if he gave up now?

He looked back at Stormfly. “Well, you have two Night Furies.” He plunged himself into that well of power. Energy flooded through him.

Astrid gasped. Blue-green light reflected in her face.

He gestured from Astrid to Stormfly. “Go!” He told the Nadder. “Get her out of here! I’ll free Muninn!”

“Yes, Alpha!”

Hiccup looked across the blazing fleet. Between the curtains of smoke he could just make out the other longship, run aground on the far side of the beach. Fixing his eyes on his destination, he crouched and launched himself into the air, spreading his wings wide.

That was a mistake.

Driven by the fires, the air beneath his left wing surged upwards, nearly flipping him out of control. He pulled in his wings and dove for the first patch of free deck he saw.

He landed heavily, the ship rocking beneath him. Water splashed into the air, sizzling as it came down on the scorched deck. Hiccup cast his gaze around. The air above the fires was chaotic and treacherous, and he couldn’t risk flying above the smoke until he’d freed Muninn. He spotted a mostly unburnt ship just along the shore. If he angled things just right...

Hiccup jumped. Rather than launching himself upwards, he threw himself forwards, opening his wings just enough to extend his leap. He touched down and scanned the fleet around him for his next target. He located a suitable boat, and jumped again. The air clawed at his wings and fins, trying everything it could to throw him off, but he held his course.

Three bounds later, Hiccup came to an abrupt halt. His destination was less than fifty yards away, but every vessel between him and the longship was half-sunk, on fire, or both. He eyed the tall mast of a nearby ship, an idea occurring to him. He crouched down and leapt towards it.

Wait for it... Now!

He pushed his tail upwards, swinging his nose towards the sky. The mast smashed into his underside, forcing the air from his lungs. He grabbed hold with all four limbs, driving his claws into the wood. He scrambled upwards, spreading his wings to balance with all four paws on the narrow tip of the mast.

From his vantage point, Hiccup could see Muninn’s cart, still secured in place on the longship’s deck. She was slumped on the planks, unmoving. For a terrible moment, he thought he was too late. No, he realised, her eyes were open, and her ear-fins twitched in response to the popping of
flames and the crashes of falling timbers.

Hiccup tensed and pushed off from the mast. Hot updrafts buffeted against him. He landed ungracefully, nearly staggering into the far railing. “Muninn!” He gasped.

The Night Fury didn’t react.

He rushed over to her. He hooked a claw beneath the leather band around her muzzle and tore it off.

“Muninn! Are you okay?!?”

Her lips twitched. He had to strain to make out her words.

“No! Please! I’ll do anything for you, just don’t make me kill them!”

Her pupils were narrow slits. Whatever she was seeing, Hiccup thought, it wasn’t what was in front of her.

“Please, not again! Just let them go, they’re no threat to you!”

“Muninn! It’s me, Hiccup!”

For the first time, she looked up at him. Her pupils widened with momentary recognition. “Hic... Hiccup?” She jerked away from him. Her pupils snapped back to feral slits. “No! Get away! Before She makes me kill you!”

Hiccup leaned in close, the tip of his muzzle inches away from hers. “That’s over, Muninn. I’m Hiccup, you transformed me, remember? ” She blinked, seeming to recognise him again. “Then, I freed you. You’re not her puppet any more.”

“No,” she whispered. “No more death.”

“Muninn?”

She pushed herself up onto her paws. “I’m fine.” She was anything but, Hiccup thought, but he didn’t press it. “How did you...?”

“Astrid and Stormfly freed me.” He looked to where the beach lay, obscured by a wall of smoke. “They’re out there somewhere, fighting. We have to help them.”

Munin shrank back, her collar knocking against the bars of her cart. “Hiccup! The whole Flock’s out there! We can’t fight them!” Her eyes were wide, almost frantic. “I won’t go back to her! I can’t!”

“Muninn.” He looked her in the eye. “I’m terrified. I have no idea how to fight that many dragons, let alone the Queen. Of course I’d rather be flying the Hel away from here. But I’m not going to. Why?

“Because I have to try.

“Stormfly watched her mother - as far as she knew, the only survivor of the Queen’s conquest - starve before her eyes. She spent years under the Queen’s control, only to regain her mind and be captured by my people in the same moment. Most of the dragons around her were going to be slaughtered, but still she sang her songs to everyone who would listen. Why?
“Because she had to try.

“I spent most of my life as a laughing stock; a weakling in a village where killing dragons is everything. When I built the weapon that shot you down, did I think it was going to bring down the elusive Night Fury? Of course not. Why did I build it?

“Because I had to try.

“And you, when you had me beneath your claws, did you know that I would learn to fly? To use the Aür? That I would free you? Did you even know if I would survive the gods-damned night?!”

“N-no.” Muninn whimpered.

Hiccup took a deep breath. His heart pounded like he’d just flown a mile with the flock snapping at his tail. He tried to moderate his tone; insistent, but not unkind. “Why did you do it?”

“I...”

“Why, Muninn?”

“I came into my power a few seasons after t-th... She ...” She shuddered. “I knew I’d only get one chance. So many times, I nearly used it, but I doubted myself, told myself that a better opportunity would come along. Then, gradually, the opportunities came further and further apart. You were the first chance in... Trinity, I can’t remember how long.”

“So...” he prompted.

“I didn’t know how much longer I could last! I had to do something!”

“Thank you.” Hiccup gazed across the longship’s prow. “My people, my father, are out there, fighting for their lives. I have to try and help them. Stormfly brought the other dragons from Berk with her; she believes in what the Night Furies stood for, she believes in us, she believes...” He recalled a hazy memory of Stormfly standing defiantly between him and a Nightmare twice her size. “... An Alpha protects them all.

“I promised I’d free her people. I have to try.” He looked back at Muninn. “Will you join me?”

“An Alpha protects them all,” she repeated. “I like the sound of that.” She stood as tall as her cart allowed. “We will try.”

Hiccup spun to face her, his eyes darting over the frame of her cart. “I’ll have you out of there in a moment...”

“No need.” She blinked, and when her eyes opened, they burned with Auric light. The spines along her back shone the same shade as her irises; a brilliant, emerald green.

Muninn closed her eyes. Her light flared, and a wave of energy radiated out from her, into her collar. Hiccup watched, awestruck as the wood crumbled to dust in its wake.

She stepped out of her cart, rolling her shoulders to shake off the remains of her yoke.

I have got to learn how to do that. Hiccup thought.

“Here they come again!” Stoick bellowed. “Hold the line!”
A gronckle fell from the sky. Stoick raised his shield to meet it. The dragon struck with the force of a boulder. Wood splintered beneath the impact. He would have been knocked flat, if not for the weight of men behind him.

The chief roared like a wounded bear and shoved back the dragon, thrusting blindly with his spear. He felt the point sink into flesh and then the haft was ripped from his hand. The Gronckle laboured into the air, revealing the two-headed dragon behind it.

“Zippleback! Scatter!”

Stoick yanked out his hammer and charged, his hoarse cry echoing off the mountainside. The front line joined him, rushing the flock, while the rear retreated, effectively splitting the line.

As soon as they got within ten paces the Zippleback took wing. The ground shook as something huge landed behind him. Stoick skidded to stop and spun around. The biggest Nightmare he’d ever seen - a massive purple titan-wing - had come down in the middle of the scattered formation. It roared, shaking the pebbles on the beach, then reared up. Stoick saw it sides tense as it prepared to douse his men in liquid fire.

“NO!” He yelled.

His hammer spun through the air, striking the Nightmare’s muzzle, forcing its head to the side.

The Nightmare turned faster than he thought possible. It’s tail whistled through the air, striking him in the side. The blow lifted him off his feet and sent him sprawling in the ash several feet down the beach.

Dazed, Stoick fumbled for his knife. Distantly, he realised he was going to die. He gritted his teeth, focusing his whole being on forcing his unresponsive limbs to move. He would go out with weapon in hand, protecting his people. He owed them that much, at least.

Screeching furiously, a blue blur struck the Nightmare in the side. The ground shook as the beast fell. Pebbles flew left and right as it thrashed furiously. Stoick felt a flash of heat as white-hot fire erupted. The Nightmare's bellows became screeches as flames tore through its hide.

And then, silence. The Nightmare’s head dropped to the ground.

Stoick staggered to his feet. A blue and yellow Nadder was perched atop the Nightmare’s body, talons embedded deep in its flesh. He looked up and met the eyes of the fierce blonde Viking on the Nadder’s back.

“Chief!” She shouted. “Are you hurt?!”

“Astrid! What."

“You’re too exposed out here,” she cut him off. “There’s more cover on the west side of the island. Get the men moving! We’ll cover you from above!”

Stoick blinked. She’d just spoken with more natural authority than most Viking chiefs he’d met; it didn’t even register for him to be annoyed that she was giving him orders. His eyes drifted back down to the Nadder she rode. The dragon stared back at him with eyes every bit as ferocious and intelligent as the Viking on her back.

The Nadder’s pupils narrowed; she squawked in alarm as Astrid shouted “duck!”.
Stoick dropped. A volley of spines whistled over his head. He heard two dragons fall to earth behind him.

He straightened up, looking over his shoulder. A pair of Nadders lay in the ash, spines protruding from their chests. He looked back at Astrid.

Her Nadder was crouched slightly, her wings half-open, tail raised high, spines bristling. Astrid was pressed tight against her back, muscles tense. Together, they were the picture of restrained action.

“I’m sorry,” Stoick blurted out.

Astrid blinked, straightening up. “What?”

“You were right. We couldn’t do this alone. I should have listened.”

“I...” She faltered, seeming to suddenly realise she was speaking to her chief.

The Nadder chirped, drawing her attention seawards. Something shot upwards from the burning fleet, dragging a line of black smoke behind it.

“What the-?”

“Watch.”

High above the battlefield the thing split into two dark specks. They roared, then pulled into parallel stoops. Stoick felt a chill go down his spine as he heard that singular note echoed in harmony.

“Night Fury!” the cry went up.

He met Astrid’s eyes. *I hope you know what you’re doing.*

“Get d-”

“NO!” Stoick roared. “They’re with us!”

A flash of blue caught his eye. He looked up in time to see a bolt of light fall from the heavens and strike a Nightmare mid-flight, blasting the dragon out of the air.

He turned back to the pair in front of him. The Nadder was tensed, wings outstretched, ready to leap, she looked back at her rider.

“Stoick...” Astrid began.

He nodded. “West side of the island. You’ll cover us.”

Astrid crouched down low to her mount. In the same motion the Nadder raised her wings. Then, with a great *woosh* of air they were gone.

A familiar battle cry broke the lull. A group of warriors split from the line, rushing forwards to encircle him. Bringing up the rear, Gobber hobbled towards him.

“Every bit the boar-headed, stubborn Viking Finn ever was,” the smith muttered, watching Astrid soar into the air.
Stoick could only nod silently in agreement. In his youth he’d had the privilege of watching a Norwegian cavalry drill; those professional soldiers hadn’t moved with half the grace and synchronicity with their mounts that Astrid displayed; her movements were so in time with her Nadder’s flaps that they almost looked like a single body.

A shadow fell over them. A green Zippleback rushed overhead, smashing into a Gronckle, sending it spinning away before it could drop onto the line. He squinted. Was that the Thorston twins sat astride its necks?

“Look at us!” Tuffnut shouted. “We’re on a dragon! We’re on dragons! All of us!”

Behind the Zippleback came a Nightmare ridden by the younger Hofferson child, and finally a Gronckle bearing the Ingerman boy.

Stoick dragged his eyes down to the ground. There was still a battle going on. “Back to the line!” he called, setting off at a jog.

Stoick slowed his pace, dropping to the rear of their group, alongside Gobber. “We’re too exposed out here.” he told his friend. “There’s more cover on the west side of the island. Get the men moving, the Dragons will cover us from above.”

“I think I’ll stay,” the smith shot back. “Just in case you’re thinking of doing something crazy.”

“I can buy them a few minutes if I give them -” he jerked his head towards the nest “-something to hunt.” He skidded to a stop, turning back the way he came.

Gobber caught him by the wrist. “Then I can double that time.”

Stoick met his old friend’s eyes. It would be good to fight side-by-side again, like they had back when they’d had fewer responsibilities... and more limbs. He opened his fist. They clasped hands.

Stoick scanned the men with them. If they survived this, they would be stepping into a world where all the old rules were gone. “Balder!” he called.

“Aye chief!”

Stoick met his eyes. If any man could be trusted to lead Berk into Astrid’s new world where Vikings rode on the backs of dragons, it was her father. “Lead the men! Go!”

“With me!” Balder shouted, raising his spear and leading the charge back to the line.

Stoick stood, only Gobber left at his side. He turned to face the nest. “One last brawl, old friend.”

“Aye, let’s make it a good one!”

Stoick roared, rushing forwards and snatching up a six-foot spear from where it had fallen, sticking in the ash. He threw it like a javelin. The weapon arced high in the air, before burying itself in the side of a Gronckle.

“Oh no!” Gobber laughed, brandishing his axe-hand. “Come on!” he bellowed. “Fight me!”

Hiccup dove. The world sped past, an indistinct blur, while his target - an orange female Nightmare - stayed in perfect focus. Fire raged in his chest. He released his shot and opened his wings in the same instant.
The flock was all around him.

A Nadder screeched, stalling as her claws rose to intercept him. He rolled, missing her talons by inches, only to nearly fly head-first into a Gronckle. He pulled in his wings, darting under the dragon, then snapped them open again, moments before crashing into the Vikings beneath.

He dodged left - weaving around the raised heads of a Zippleback, then swerved right as a Nadder leapt up from the forest of spears. Another Gronckle tried to block him. He turned his bank into a barrel roll, passing over the dragon upside-down. He flipped back upright.

And he was free.

He focused his Auric light into his wings, and pointed his nose skywards. He sped upwards like a shot from a bow, leaving the dragons pursuing him hundreds of yards below. A heartbeat later, he finished his climb, level with the peak of the nest.

A bitter taste settled at the back of his throat. Before, when he’d fled the nest, he’d fought back against the flock almost instinctively, fearing for his life. Now, though, the dragons below were no threat to him; he was a Night Fury - even if they heard his dive, it was too late to avoid his fire.

*You don’t have a choice*, he told himself. He knew that holding back his fire would doom both the Vikings and the dragons. But that didn’t stop him imagining every dragon below as himself in the battle over Dökkhöfn.

A shout drifted up to him, dragging his attention back to the present.

“Retreat! Push to the western shore!”

Hiccup scanned the beach. The carefully organised formations had collapsed into a single, beleaguered mass, pressed on all sides by the Flock. Gouts of fire erupted over the Vikings; four dragons darting back and forth, scrambling to keep the air over their heads clear.

Two figures stood defiantly before the vanguard, the flock closing in around them.

*Dad*?! What in Odin’s name did he think he was doing?

A maroon Nadder swung about, closing in on the pair from behind.

Hiccup knew what he had to do. He folded his wings.

Instinctively his eyes locked onto his target. The world around him faded away. He opened his jaws, igniting his fires, as his wings began to buzz, sounding that familiar shriek.

Something smashed into him from the side. A constellation of pain exploded across his torso as teeth and claws dug into his flesh. His shot went wide, striking the earth and throwing up a cloud of ash and stone. He lashed out, sinking his claws into the dragon attached to him. He shoved with all his might, roaring in agony as the dragon’s teeth and claws tore their way free.

He instinctively reached for his power as he fought to arrest his fall. Energy surged through him, deadening his pain. He heard a second whistle, and the Nadder he’d originally targeted vanished in a flash of blue light.

Two more Nadders swooped towards him. He’d lost too much speed.

Hiccup dropped.
He hit the ground running, his paws throwing up small clouds of ash. Above him, the Nadders slowed, backwinging hard to avoid a collision. Hiccup snapped his wings open and leapt back into the air. A Gronckle fireball burst where he’d stood a moment previously. Shards of half-melted rock flew upwards. One of them struck his underside, just to left of his breastbone, embedding itself in the flight muscle.

Hiccup cried out. The light within him surged, dulling the pain. Not fast enough. Every stroke of his wings felt like driving a knife into his flesh. He grit his teeth against the agony and flapped with all his might, out-climbing a Zippleback that barreled towards him.

“Leave us!” Stoick shouted. Hiccup barely heard him over the pounding of his heart. “Protect the others!”

Hiccup glided above the chaos, wings trembling as he gasped for breath.

His flight muscles twitched, and something moved inside him. A jagged fragment of rock fell from his chest. It tumbled towards the beach below, where the warriors of Berk fought their way westward, step by painstaking step.

His ear-fins twitched, picking out a Nadder’s screech from the dreadful symphony of screams and roars. Hiccup dove towards the sound before he’d even realised it came from Stormfly.

The Nadder flew at breakneck speed over the heads of the Vikings, a young blue Nightmare snapping at her. A faint light shimmered beneath Stormfly’s scales. In the time it took Hiccup to ready his fires, she crossed the mass of warriors and was flying away from the battle.

Hiccup fired.

The Nightmare crashed onto the beach, somersaulting several times before coming to rest.

Hiccup pulled out of the dive, zipping over the beach alongside Stormfly. He looked back. A dozen dragons peeled off from the battle, pursuing them.

“He!“ He shouted.

He angled his tail and shot towards the clouds. Stormfly followed a heartbeat later, nearly keeping pace with him, despite his Aür-assisted wings.

Astrid loosened her grip on the Nadder’s neck as they leveled out, the Queen’s dragons left far below. “Thanks!” she called over the roaring wind.

Hiccup looked over at Stormfly. “You’re using the Aür!“ he exclaimed. “How?“

“The Alphas weren’t the only ones to inherit the Trinity’s power,” Stormfly panted. On the far side of the beach, Muninn dove, intercepting a Nadder headed for a Nightmare ridden by Astrid’s brother. “If we survive this, I’ll explain everything.“

“Zippleback!” Someone screamed below.

Hiccup didn’t have time to feel guilty. He snapped in his wings, plummeting towards the cry.

A green cloud billowed from one of the dragon’s mouths, consuming the first few ranks. Hiccup cracked open his jaws. As soon as he felt warmth blossom in his chest, he fired. A blue star streaked ahead of him.
It was too slow.

The Zippleback’s other head snapped its jaws. The cloud detonated in a flash of yellow-white light, leaving behind a tangled mess of half-burnt bodies. Hiccup’s shot landed a moment too late, striking the base of the Zipplebacks necks, severing its heads instantly.

“NO!” Hiccup roared. He forced his wings open and pulled a tight half-loop. As soon as he flipped right-side up he breathed in as much air as he could and spat three fireballs at dragons that swarmed into the gap.

He whipped around in a tight circle. In the fraction of a second it took him to come about, a group of Gronckles had replaced the dragons scattered by his shots. He fired again.

Sudden, intense heat pressed against his scales. Three Nightmares converged on him, scales ablaze, spraying flames before them. With nowhere else to go, Hiccup snarled in frustration and shot up, out of reach.

Orvar and the Twins swooped underneath him, their Zippleback and Nightmare snatching two Gronckles out of the air. Fishlegs buzzed behind them on a Gronckle of his own, launching lava-balls at any dragons who tried to land. The air vibrated with Muninn’s diving whistle as the Vikings stepped forwards, over the bodies of their friends, reforming the wall.

Hiccup forced his wings to beat faster, he needed to get back down there before-

A dozen Gronckles stilled their wings, dropping onto the line. The wall shattered completely. Muninn cried out as a Gronickle-ball burst beneath her, glowing shards of rock perforating her wings.

At last, Hiccup reached altitude and flipped back over into another dive. He barely managed to get off his first shot before flames erupted beneath him, forcing him up, away from the battle; away from those he fought to protect. Muninn laboured up beside him, her wings dappled with spots of green light as the holes in her membranes knit closed.

The precursive clap of a second Zippleback blast echoed off the nest. A sense of despair welled up in him, but he dove towards the sound anyway.

*It’s hopeless,* Hiccup thought as the world blurred around him. He dispatched the Zippleback in a flash of blue, but the damage was already done. The line was broken and the flock spilled into the gap, lashing out with claw and fire. More dragons swooped towards him, forcing him away.

Hiccup flipped over, targeting another Zippleback. As he fell, he watched, helpless as a Nightmare battered its way through the remains of the wall, spraying liquid fire into the breach. *There’s too many of them; we can’t be everywhere at once.*

The Zippleback exploded. Hiccup fired again in quick succession, blasting a Nadder that flew across his path - its claws stained red with Viking blood.

A wave of numbness washed over Hiccup. He let his wings carry him up, away from the battle. Below him, thinking, feeling creatures screamed and died in agony. The cries of men and dragons blurred together in his mind. He couldn’t do this. He wasn’t a warrior. He didn’t enjoy this chaos and destruction.

*All this wasted life, for what?*

Burning anger bubbled up from deep within. He hated, truly hated, the Queen for what she made
him do - even now, when he was free from her will, she forced him to kill innocent dragons to protect his people.

All because of one. One who dares to call themselves ‘Alpha’. One who claims to protect her flock. 

Like ice meeting lava and flashing to steam, his desperation collided with his fury and erupted in the form of a single word.

“Stop!”

For a moment, the battlefield stilled.

Part 2: Shadows

“Stop!”

The roar swept over the beach, carrying with it an invisible wave of energy. Dragons stilled as it it passed, stopping mid flight. Stormfly slowed her wingbeats, gliding between flaps.

On her back, Astrid sat up.

“What just happened?”

The Nadder trilled softly, uncertain. All around them, the flock had halted its assault, the dragons hovering in place.

The silence was almost more disturbing than the clash and clamour of battle.

Astrid gasped. “Stormfly, Look!”

She looked up. “Trinity’s Fire...!”

Above them shone an aquamarine star in the shape of a Night Fury.

Realisation suddenly struck her; She couldn’t feel the crushing pressure of the Queen’s will against her power; in its place she felt a buoying energy, supporting her, strengthening her defences.

Stormfly felt a rush of emotion as understanding dawned on her.

The Flock woke up.

As one, they blinked and looked around, as if seeing where they were for the first time. A thousand grunts of confusion and growls of anguish broke the silence.

“Get ready!” A Viking shouted. “Stand together!”

From within the shadows of the nest, a thunderous roar rang out.

Invaders! They assault your nest! Threaten your Queen! Drive them back into the sea!

Stormfly wasn’t sure how, but she felt Astrid cringe on her back; as if she could almost hear the Queen’s words.

A handful of dragons dove towards the massed Vikings. Most stayed where they were, casting agitated looks at each other; they had heard, but for the first time in their lives they weren’t
compelled to obey.

Stormfly’s kin screamed as the Berkians repelled the scattered, uncoordinated assault. Anger spread through the flock, replacing the confusion.

_They need a leader_, Stormfly realised. The flock was free, but without someone to follow, they would willingly go back to the only master most of them had ever known. She looked up. The light faded from Hiccup’s body, and he dropped several body-lengths straight down before he caught himself.

She scanned the sky for the other Night Fury. She found her gliding over the edge of the battle.

_Come on, Stormfly prayed. Claim your birthright. Lead us._

She remained mute as, with every heartbeat, more of the flock fell back to the Queen.

“Stormfly...” Astrid breathed, uneasy.

The Nadder tore her gaze from the black silhouette. She looked at the dragons around her, their eyes crying out for leadership.

She took a deep breath.

“Dragons of the north!” she bellowed. “Look to the sky!

“The Night Furies have returned!”

She flapped hard, rising above the flock.

“Slavery was not always the way of our kind! The Queen tried to hide it, but look inside yourselves, you remember! There was a time when Alphas ruled with respect, not fear! That time can live again, but only if you fight for it!

“Yilbegän’s Judgement has come for the Queen! So Fight! Fight for a true Alpha! For freedom; for justice;

“For your future!”

Stormfly roared, exhaling a column of brilliant white fire. She snapped her wings to her sides and dove, smashing talons-first into the flank of a Nightmare that swept towards the Vikings below.

Above her, the flock exploded in a deafening roar.

A thousand roars of pain and fury echoed off the rocks beneath Hiccup. The Queen bellowed in response, more dragons swarming out of the breach. The newly freed fell on their former nest-mates. The flock disintegrated into a writhing mass of teeth and claws.

The air reverberated with the cries of injured and dying dragons.

Hiccup hung there, reeling from his shout and the horror unfolding below. The moment the word had left his jaws a tidal-wave of sensation - images, scents, sounds, pain - washed over him. His mind shattered; the pieces scattered over the battlefield. Then, a moment of blackness, and he was falling head-first towards the beach.

_Is that how it is for the Queen? He wondered. How does she handle it?_
A draconic screech tore through his thoughts. Two Nightmares collided in mid-air, snapping and clawing at each other. The Vikings scrambled out of the way as the pair hit the ground and continued to fight, flipping over and over; a deadly whirlwind of teeth and claws, flaming bodies and lashing tails.

He shook himself. The battle wasn’t over yet; he had a promise to keep.

He folded his wings. The dragons heard his diving whistle and cleared a path. He focused on the wrestling Nightmares. Like one always recognised the face of their family, he knew instinctively which dragon was free. The Nightmares grew closer, rolling over and over in their struggle.

Now!

They flipped once more. His shot struck one of them square in the back. Hiccup snapped open his wings.

The remaining nightmare shoved off the body of his kin and stood. “Thank you, my Alpha!”

Hiccup flexed the muscles along his spine, whipping around in a quick circle. For a moment he thought he’d been transported back to the battle of Dökkhöfn. Serpentine shadows darkened the sky, flitting overhead faster than the eye could follow. Gouts of fire lit the clouds, and stray Gronckle shots fell to earth like burning lightning. In places, the fighting was so thick that draconic blood fell like rain.

Hiccup felt sick. What have I done?

“This isn’t my fault.” He growled. “This is all the Queen.”

Stormfly rushed past, a radiant blue streak. “Up!” she shouted. “Drive them away from the Vikings!”

Hiccup tilted his head back and fired a shot into the underside of one of the Queen’s dragons. He flapped hard, darting through the gap he’d created. He rose above the chaos, casting about for Muninn; Where was she?

Below him, the dragons tore each other apart, his village trapped beneath them. If this went on much longer, all their efforts, all this sacrifice, would be for naught. He grit his teeth.

_An Alpha protects them all._

He drove his wings downwards, looping up and over into a dive.

He fell at a shallow angle, screeching over the breadth of the battle. He opened his jaws, air rushing down his throat to fuel his fire. Dragons on both sides heard his rising whistle and scattered.

But they weren’t his target.

A brilliant bolt of light streaked from his maw and struck the side of the nest. The whole mountain reverberated with a thunderous blast.

Hiccup opened his wings with a jerk. Pain lanced down his shoulders as the wind tried to tug them from their sockets.

“Stop this!” He roared. “If you truly protect your flock, release them! Stop this pointless fighting!”
He’d barely cleared the nest’s peak when a low rumble shook the island

*You steal my flock, dare to challenge ME, and now you demand my surrender?!*

An almighty crash rocked the mountain. Boulders the size of houses tumbled down the Nest’s sides.

*Under my guidance, we have seen the most prosperous seasons since your kind first stood on two legs!*

The nest shook again. Cracks spiderwebbed out from the breach.

*No! I will crush you and your people, just like the Night Furies!*

For a moment, the only sound was the groaning of tortured rock.

Then, with a final heave, the wall of the nest exploded.

Muninn’s wings froze.

*She* was free.

Bands of ice tightened around her chest. Her heart beat frantically and she gasped desperately for air, but none of it seemed to reach her lungs.

*You belong to me now, little one...*

*No, no, no, no,* she thought. This wasn’t happening. Not now.

But *She* was free. *She* breathed in and exhaled a great jet of fire. Hot air fled the flames, pushing Muninn upwards. Below, dragons - both free and of the Flock - screamed as they were incinerated.

*She pressed herself harder against the rock ledge, frantically searching for somewhere, anywhere to hide. Every surface she saw was lit by the same blood-red light. The monster drew closer, looming over her."

“You know,” she whimpered. “That’s not real.” She was a Night Fury, an Alpha. It was her born duty to protect the dragons of the North.

But she couldn't move.

Because *She* was free.

Muninn could only watch as *She* reared up, drawing in a great gulp of air. She braced herself for more screams.

Fire blossomed on the back of *Her* skull.

Four dragons broke from the fighting and flew towards *Her*, the vikings on their backs shouting taunts at the Red Death.

*What are they doing?* Muninn thought. Even with Hiccup’s protection, getting that close to *Her* was dangerous.

*She* staggered forwards, shaking rocks loose from the nest with every thundering step. *She* swung
her head around to snap at the offending dragons. *She* was too slow and as *She* turned, another of the four - a Nadder - dove at *Her* neck, raking *Her* hide with a claw of white fire.

*She* bellowed in pain. Dragons abandoned their fighting and scattered. Shouts rose up from the Vikings below as they retreated, faced with the monster at the heart of the nest.

Muninn’s breath caught in her throat. They were distracting *Her*.

No, no, no. It wasn’t right. She was the last Night Fury; she shouldn’t be frozen with fear while four ordinary dragons gave their lives to save the rest. But -

*I am your Queen, your Alpha. You belong to me.*

*Who am I?*

*SHE screamed internally, but her throat uttered the words regardless.*

She couldn’t move.

She could only watch as *Her* patience ran out.

*Away!* *She* commanded.

Three of the dragons staggered mid-air, then turned tail and fled, despite their riders’ protests. Only one, the Nadder, remained. She flipped over and dove away a moment too late.

*Her* jaws yawned open, drawing in a great torrent of air. The Nadder flapped with all her might, but slowly her momentum ran out. Wing-length by wing-length she slipped backwards towards the waiting maw.

She couldn’t-

With a shrill whistle, a black blur fell from the heavens.

Hiccup’s shot struck *Her* jaw. The blast threw the Nadder clear, but also tore the human from her back.

“*Astrid!*” The Nadder screamed in voice of pure agony. “*NO!*”

Muninn had heard that same scream before. Dozens and dozens of times, as she tore a Fury’s Partner from them; one falling to earth, a burnt wreck, the other wailing and roaring in grief and rage. Before, she could only listen to the cries and hope the other’s end was swift.

Not this time.

She folded her wings.

For too long, her diving shriek had been only a portent of doom. Now though, it would be as those legendary Furies her sire had spoken of; a sound of hope. She focused on the tiny, plummeting speck below. The human tumbled head over heel, her flailing limbs catching the air just enough that Muninn gained on her.

The ground rushed up to meet them both.

She spread her wings. Her flight surfaces strained as she fought to raise her muzzle towards the horizon.
Then, she was out of the dive, the beach a blur beneath her.

The roar of the wind faded and she heard a second whistle. Hiccup pulled out of his stoop beside her.

“Did you get her?” He asked, breathless.

Muninn looked down between her forelegs. The Viking hung beneath her, dangling by her ankle from one of her forepaws. The human twisted her torso and looked back at her, grinning madly.

The girl was probably delirious with shock and the sudden blood-rush to the head, but Muninn couldn’t help it; she smiled toothlessly back at her. “Hold on.”

She swung the little Viking forwards then let go of her leg. Muninn caught her by the shoulders as she spun upright, then flared her wings, slowing down and dropping the human onto her feet.

Astrid managed a single syllable of encouragement before a frantic Nadder nuzzled her with enough force to wind her.

Muninn sped over the battlefield. They flew at the height of Her knees, the rest of Her bulk towering over them like a great, living cliff. She felt familiar claws of ice clutching at her.

She was free. She who had owned her, controlled her every move; She who had forced her to murder her own kind.

Her wing muscles stiffened.

“No,” she whispered. “Don’t think about it. You’re protecting the others. You can do that.”

She kept flapping. “Hiccup!” she called. “What do we do?”

He looked at Her, eyes scrutinising Her form as Her titanic jaws crunched straight through a catapult like a bundle of twigs.

“She has wings!” he exclaimed. “Let’s see if she can use them!” He angled his tail and shot upwards.

“Protecting the others,” she repeated, following him towards the clouds.

“We cannae help any more! Let’s go!”

Stoick stood, surrounded by the bodies of a dozen dragons, gazing up at the monster that had emerged from the nest. He recalled his father’s speech about what a Viking could do; ‘crush mountains, level forests, tame seas’

How foolish that sounded now.

They called the Night Fury the ‘offspring of Lightning and Death itself’ but the Queen truly was a beast out of the Eddas - some bastard spawn of Níðhögg or Jörmungand, he was sure.

“Stoick! Come on!” Gobber grabbed at his tunic, trying to pull him away.

Stoick batted his old friend’s hand away. “Gobber, look.”

The Queen’s first blast of fire had stretched from the walls of the nest all the way to the shoreline;
Stoick knew she could annihilate all that remained of Berk in a single breath. Yet she was prevented from doing so by five young Vikings on the backs of their mortal enemies.

In all his years, Stoick had never seen anything so brave. The four adult dragons were like flies on a Yak, buzzing around the Queen’s head and darting in to flame at her when she turned to snap at the others.

The Queen roared, the sound striking Stoick with tangible force. The dragons fled. Astrid’s Nadder hesitated a moment behind the others. The Queen turned towards her; monstrous jaws opening, her titanic lungs drawing in such a torrent of air that the Nadder was physically sucked towards her.

Deafened by her roar, Stoick saw only a brief blur before blue light flashed on the Queen’s jaw, and Nadder and Rider were torn apart. Stoick’s breath caught. The Nadder and the Fury both dove to catch Astrid, but they were too far away; they wouldn’t reach her in time.

Out of nowhere, a second black shape fell from the heavens, snatching Astrid out of the air moments before they smashed into the ground.

Gobber tugged at his tunic more insistently.

*You can’t help them.* He mouthed.

Stoick exhaled explosively. He was right. Reluctantly, he allowed the smith to lead him away, towards the rest of the warriors. The fate of Berk now lay in the hands of the dragons.

He looked back over his shoulder in time to see two dark specks speeding upwards.

*Gods be with you, my son.*

Hiccup strove for altitude, Auric light blazing within. Muninn climbed alongside him, her own light shining from her spines. The dark, smoke-laden clouds formed an almost solid ceiling that rapidly rushed towards them. A hundred yards. Fifty.

Ten.

*Here goes nothing.*

“*Now!*” They flipped over.

Below, the beach was clear. The Vikings retreated to the west and the dragons scattered into the fog bank. He fixed his gaze on the Queen, narrowing his eyes against the wind as they began to fall.

His folded wings buzzed, giving voice to his diving shriek. He heard that familiar note both from within - vibrating through his bones and reverberating in his skull - and from without as Muninn fell beside him.

He opened his jaws. He felt a moment of cold as icy northern air rushed in, then heat as his fire sparked. Fueled by air rushing down his throat, the flames burned ever hotter. The shriek was almost deafening now, drowning out even the roaring wind.

The Queen turned to look at them, but it was too late. Night Furies never missed.

The moment before he fired, Hiccup flared his Auric light and focused it inwards, into his fire-source.
When his shot left his maw it shone a dazzling blue-white.

Their bolts detonated simultaneously. The Queen staggered, then ponderously collapsed onto her side. Flaming mushroom-clouds blossomed above her.

Hiccup and Muninn forced open their wings, covering the length of the beach in the blink of an eye.

“Do you think that did it?” he asked as they came about.

A shadow fell over them as a great wing-sail stretched towards the sky. The trailing edge was tattered from centuries of disuse. Dead scales and pieces of dirt were shaken loose as the Queen lumbered to her feet, stretching her wings to their full extent.

The pressure spiked painfully in Hiccup’s ears as she drove her wings downwards. He stared, dumbstruck as she slowly rose into the air. They whipped past her nose and shot upwards

“Well, she can fly.”

“Now what!?” Muninn’s voice trembled with fear.

Hiccup shook himself. Think! Stormfly, and his own experience, had taught him that their strongest asset was their flight; he knew they needed to get the Queen into the air, but what next? He scanned their surroundings.

The passage of so many wings had diffused the fog bank; the shadows of the first row of sea stacks loomed in the mist. “I have an idea! Follow me!” He flapped hard, accelerating towards the stone pillars.

Close to the nest, the stacks were widely spaced. It took only a slight twitch of his tail to dodge the grey monolith, while the Queen’s massive wingspan forced her to swing wide.

“I swear,” he growled, weaving around the next pillar. “If I never see another sea stack-”

CRASH! A blast of air rocked Hiccup’s flight. He glanced behind. The Queen’s maw was mere feet from his tail-fins. She was fast for her size!

Heart suddenly pounding in his ears, he reached for his light and shot forwards, overtaking Muninn. Ahead, a vein of softer rock had been exposed to the elements and had weathered away, leaving behind a narrow archway. He folded his wings, angling towards the gap.

He heard a low woosh as he passed through the gap, then a short whistle as Muninn followed.

He spread his wings as soon as he was clear. He risked another look back. The Queen showed no sign of slowing. Surely she wouldn’t-

The Queen ploughed head-first into the archway. The rock shattered under the impact, barely impeding her flight. Her jaws opened. Sickly green gas pooled at the back of her throat.

“Here it comes!” Hiccup warned. “Look out!”

They split up. Muninn broke left. He dove right.

A moment later, a jet of flame blazed through the space between them. Hiccup felt the blistering heat even through his scales. The flames washed up against the sides of another pillar, leaving the stone glowing red-hot.
Hiccup and Muninn regrouped on the other side of the stack, just as the Queen smashed through it.

“Well, that didn’t work!” he shouted over the crashing rocks. “Any ideas?”

Muninn’s eyes were wide with fear; she was barely holding together.

Hiccup’s mind whirled. Outflying the Queen alone wasn’t going to be enough. He ran through everything he knew about their species; **Night Fury. Speed unknown. Size unknown. The unholy offspring of Lightning and Death itself. Never steals food. Never shows itself.**

“That’s it!”

He looked to the panic-stricken Night Fury flying alongside him.

“**Muninn!**” He called. “We can get through this, but I need you to stay with me, okay?”

“O-okay!”

Another sea stack rushed towards them. They split on either side of it, the Queen ramming straight through behind them.

“**Now, time to disappear!**” He raised his tail and sped upwards. With a single wingbeat he was clear of the sea-stack maze. He looked to his side. A second Night Fury climbed with him. “**That’s it Muninn! Come on!**”

Below, the Queen roared and gave chase. Hiccup forced his wings to beat faster, focusing on the soot-stained sheet above. Until they reached the cover of the clouds, they were exposed and vulnerable.

He heard a rush of air from below.

They split apart, spiraling around each other as flames roared upwards. The Queen gained speed, closing the gap between them. Her maw yawned open.

Then they were surrounded by dense grey cloud. The Queen vanished from view. Hiccup heard her jaws snap closed on empty air. He stilled his wings, gliding silently as they swung around in a wide arc.

Hiccup squinted; he could hear the heavy thump-thump of the Queen’s wings all around him, but he couldn’t see anything through the thick soup of smoke and fog. Remembering his time under the Queen’s control, he closed his eyes. He contorted the muscles in his throat and let out that strange, soundless roar.

Colourless light swam behind his eyes.

The strange vision was dominated by a bright shape off his right wing, behind it he could make out the dim, indistinct outlines of the beach and sea stacks. The shape was distorted - the wings blurred into formless blobs of light - but it was unmistakably the Queen.

His eyes opened. He dove towards the shape, Muninn right behind him. Their folded fins buzzed. Thick grey mist rushed over his muzzle.

The air cleared. Hiccup fired. Two flashes of blue light lit the clouds, overlapping peals of thunder echoing off the mountain below. The Queen roared as Hiccup whistled over her head.

He looked back just before they left the pocket of air cleared by her wings. A wave of fear and
dread crashed over him, like he’d just plunged into the icy waters below.

The Queen’s hide was scorched black where their shots impacted, but her scales were unbroken.

Muninn fought to keep her wings from trembling. She shouldn’t be here. She couldn’t be here, because that meant She was-

_No. Focus on Hiccup, he needs you._

She fixed her gaze on the male in front of her, waiting for him to flip over and lead them into another dive.

He kept gliding straight ahead, further away from Her.

“Hiccup!” she whispered urgently.

He looked back at her, eyes wide with fear. “Our shots aren’t breaking through her hide! What do we do?!”

“No...” Muninn breathed.

_She_ was free.

_She_ was unstoppable.

Dark memories burst forth from the recesses of her mind.

_The last Night Fury circled far above the mountain, so high that even to the dragons swirling around the peak she would appear no larger than a bird. It was so bitterly cold that she couldn’t feel the tips of her outstretched wings. The numbness suited her. Up here, where her lungs strained to keep her conscious in the thin air, the screams were quieter._

_It was easier to forget what she had lost._

_Her_ eyes forced her to watch the dragons below. She knew she was not to participate in what was to come; her role was only to watch for any survivors of her kind.

_Below, a flock of Gronckles and other stone-eaters slowly buzzed forwards. They came into a hover and opened their jaws, unleashing a thunderous barrage of half-molten rocks onto the mountainside._

_Stone withered under the assault. Impact after impact carved great chunks out of the mountain. Huge boulders crashed down the slope. Below the tree-line, the foothills were consumed in a vast blaze._

_The mountain exploded. Rocks flew outwards, arcing higher than the Flock before falling to the snow-covered ground. In their wake followed the King of the nest, a magnificent Red Death, older and bigger than the Queen, his spines blazing a brilliant crimson in the bright winter sun._

_The King roared. What is the meaning of this?! His voice rang clear in her mind even at her altitude. You enslave my flock, assault my nest, Yilbegän’s children will kill you for this!_

_The Queen’s reply came as one voice from the throats of her flock. “The Night Furies are dead. Your flock is mine now, brother.”_
No... The King stopped, hovering in place before the flock. NO!

He roared, exhaling a brilliant jet of fire. He beat his wings and surged forwards, the smoke from his breath curling around him. The flock scattered before the King’s rage.

The last Night Fury couldn’t help but feel a surge of hope. This was a Red Death, inheritor of Koyash’s fire, in his prime. The King was a force of nature; a hurricane of righteous fury.

Then the Queen returned fire.

Flames leapt simultaneously from the jaws of a thousand dragons, streaking towards the King. The last Night Fury lost sight of him almost immediately, the great Red Death consumed in a cloud of smoke, lit from within by flash after flash.

Still, she could hear the King, his bellows of pain and rage audible over the ceaseless rumble of explosions.

The last Night Fury held onto her hope; Alphas did not die easily.

A full minute passed, the flock never letting up their assault. A jet of fire burst forth from the growing cloud of smoke, but the flock was so scattered that it only caught a pawful of dragons. Another minute passed. More spurts of fire followed the first, but the flock kept up the barrage, even as the dragons beside them fell from the sky in blazing meteors.

A third minute slipped agonisingly by, the last Night Fury unable to look away. The King’s cries became more and more pained and desperate. His wings - when she glimpsed them through the smoke - grew increasingly tattered.

Eventually they could support him no more.

The King fell. Smoke trailed from bloody rents in his hide. His once proud red markings were smothered beneath a layer of char.

“Muninn!” he roared.

The King struck the mountainside. His remaining fire-gas exploded with a thunderous blast that echoed off the surrounding peaks. A column of thick black smoke, heavy with the stench of burnt flesh rose up, engulfing her.

“Muninn!” Hiccup shouted.

She blinked. The scent of burning vanished from her nostrils. She was no longer surrounded by heavy, black smoke, but dark grey storm clouds. She heard air rushing behind her.

She folded her wings. Flames roared less than a wing-length overhead. She gritted her teeth, feeling her scales crack and skin blister beneath the ferocious heat.

“Muninn!” Hiccup called again. “That was too close! Are you okay?”

“What?!” she gasped.

“What?!”

“We need to aim for her wings! It’s the only way to stop her!”

Hiccup nodded. “Okay. On three. One... two...
“Three!”

They turned sharply, arching up and over Her.

You can do this.

They fell, piercing through the clouds. She desperately swung Her head from side to side, but they were too small and too fast for Her eyes. They fired. Bolts of blue light streaked through the clouds, striking Her wings just beyond the shoulders.

She roared and spun to face the direction they’d come from. At the same moment they opened their wings. They shot over Her tail, then split apart. Hiccup pulled away to the left, while Muninn banked hard in the opposite direction, hugging the edge of the clouds.

Halfway through the turn, Muninn heard Hiccup’s diving screech. She pulled in her wings, tightening her turn and plummeting back towards Her. As soon as the clouds parted she unleashed her fire. Their shots struck the centre of her wings.

She cried out in pain. Muninn heard a whisper of wind as Hiccup sped past her in the other direction.

She was ready for them on the third strike. As Muninn looped over and dove again, She roared in blind fury, exhaling a jet of flame. She whipped Her head from side to side, rolling over and over. Fire blasted outwards in every direction.

The clouds around her lit orange. “Muninn!” Hiccup screamed. “Look out!”

Muninn snapped her wings open, flapping hard. The glow behind her grew brighter. Panic and Auric light surged within her. She sped forwards. She felt the fierce heat against her scales. At the last moment, she folded one wing and rolled.

Too late.

She screamed. A bolt of agony arced down her spine.

Red light. A monster towering over her.

“No!” she gasped, her lungs pumping air through her jaws faster than her thundering heartbeat.

Focus on the pain. That was real.

She twisted as she fell. Her tail streamed out above her. Green light shimmered over the scorched remains of her left fin, trying to repair the burnt flesh. Given time, it would heal.

But time was the one thing they didn’t have.

Already she could feel her reserves of Auric power dwindling, her wound sucking it away. Freeing the flock must have drained Hiccup too; they both had to be left with mere sparks.

And when the power ran out, they would be Hers again.

Or She would simply kill them.

Muninn flipped over and pulled out of her tumble, labouring back up towards Her. She fought for every body-length climbed, struggling against the pain in her tail and the uneven airflow over her fins.
She heard another whistle above her, and a flash of blue lit the clouds, momentarily illuminating Her silhouette.

It wasn’t enough. Their light would run out before they made Her fall. The familiar fear clutched at her chest. It was over. Unless they found some way to tear open the holes in Her wings now ...

Muninn knew what she had to do.

Part of her recoiled from the idea; she felt the fear trying to lock her wings straight.

She closed her eyes, focusing on the screams that haunted her sleep; the last cries of hundreds of dragons that had died by her fires - by Her will. She had been weak, incapable of resisting, unable to save them. But she hadn’t forgotten them.

She opened her eyes.

Her wing swept down in front of her. Muninn dove. She cracked open her jaws. Her fire flared within her. She released a bolt of blue light that streaked ahead of her, blasting a hole in the titan’s membrane.

Muninn kept her wings pressed tightly to her sides, falling through the rent in Her wing. She spread her wings, stalling just in front of Her nose. “Is that the best you can do?!” she taunted.

“Muninn!” Hiccup cried. “What are you- NO!”

Her jaws began to part. Muninn flipped over, pointing her nose towards the ground. The Red Death’s maw snapped shut a heartbeat later. “Come on!” she roared. “Chase me!”

Muninn glanced back as She slowly tipped over, following her into the stoop. The wind rushed over her fins ever faster. Her damaged tail fin was in agony, her abused flight muscles burned. Still, she fought to hold the dive.

Just a bit longer, she thought. Have to make this work.

A deafening roar rang in her ears.

You think you can defy me! I am your Alpha! Your Queen! You belong to me!

Her jaws slammed shut less than a wing-length behind her.

Hold on Muninn. You can do this.

The clouds parted, the beach rushed up to meet them. Behind her, air rushed into a sudden void.

“NO!” She roared. “You are not my Queen!”

She flipped over, throwing out her wings. Her maw blotted out the sky. Fire-gas pooled at the back of Her throat.

The last Night Fury breathed in sharply.

Air rushed between her jaws, down her throat, to her fire-source. Flames blossomed at her core.

For so long, she had clung to the memory of her family flying over the vast ice sheets of their home, brilliant Aurlós shining above them. Now, that light burned within her. She drew on every last spark of power she had left, focusing it into her fire. This is for my parents, she thought.
She exhaled.

Her teeth retracted instinctively as radiant, emerald fire leapt between them. Her shot flew straight and true, streaking upwards, igniting the gases at the back of Her throat.

*Her* eyes widened. Flames spewed uncontrollably from her maw. Panicked, *She* spread *Her* wings.

A terrible *ripping* sound filled the air, as the weight of the wind forced the holes in *Her* wings wider.

Muninn tore her gaze away. Precious seconds passed as she fought to right herself; to face towards the ground. She was too low. Too fast. Without the Aür, she could barely move her injured tailfin.

Gritting her teeth against the pain, she forced her nose up until, finally, her wings caught the air. The wind hit her like a solid object, spinning her around. She cried out, feeling *something* in her chest tear under the strain.

*Her* head struck the ground and detonated, the blastwave throwing Muninn upwards while *Her* upper body still fell ponderously towards her. Every flap felt like driving claws into the Night Fury’s chest, but she forced her wings to move. Her vision swam as she darted between *Her* spines, fleeing the ravenous flames. For a moment she was back in the sea-stacks chasing Hiccup. Or was it Stormfly?

The last spine rushed past and was devoured by the explosion. For a single, glorious heartbeat, she was free.

Then a shadow fell over her.

She looked up. The former Queen’s club-tail loomed ahead. Her flight muscles cramped solid, wingtips trembling. Utterly spent, she could do nothing to avoid it.

*It’s what they deserve,* she thought, *let the old world die completely.*

She closed her eyes, waiting for the impact.

*It’s over. They’ll finally be free.*

Ash fell thick as the worst of winter’s blizzards. Acrid smoke stung Stoick’s eyes. Behind him, voices called out, telling him it wasn’t safe. Stoick ignored them, pushing further into the miasma.

“Hiccup!” He shouted, noxious fumes burning the back of his throat.

He passed flickering patches of light in the murk - chunks of the Queen still ablaze after the explosion.

“Hiccup!” He called again. “Son!”

A lonely breeze washed over the desolate battlefield. The smoke shifted, revealing a shallow crater;

And a motionless black shape at its center.

Stoick staggered forwards. “Hiccup!”

The Night Fury didn’t react. He recognised its markings now, it was the larger one - his son. *Oh*
His legs gave out, and he dropped to his knees on the rim of the crater.

“Hiccup...” Tears welled up in his eyes, and he couldn’t find the will to stop them. His son, the last connection he had to Valka - the last source of light in his life - was gone. Why?

Because he’d been a gods-damned arrogant fool.

From the moment they’d set foot on the island they were doomed. The flock would have broken and crushed them, or failing that, their master would have sent them all to Helheim in a single breath. It was only thanks to the actions of dragons that Berk survived.

They’d still lost people - losses that they could scarcely afford with the village population decimated by dragon attacks.

Regardless, his people owed their chance to repair and rebuild to their ancestral enemy.

And his son.

“Oh, son...” he sobbed. He’d imprisoned him, disowned him, and forced him to lead them to the nest. Hiccup had no part in this, yet, when the time came, he gave his life like a true Viking; protecting his village;

Correcting his father’s mistake.

“I...” Stoick choked out. “I did this...”

He wasn’t sure how long he’d knelt there when he heard heavy footsteps approaching.

Astrid emerged from the smoke, her Nadder close beside her - practically rubbing shoulders with her. She came to a sudden stop when she saw the body in the crater. Her hand flew to her lips.

“No...”

A shadow passed overhead. The Night Fury silently settled to the ground beside them.

Stoick forced himself to turn and meet their gazes. “Hic-” He choked. “My son...”

Astrid looked puzzled for a moment, her gaze flicking between his son and the other black dragon.

“Stoick,” she began gently, “That’s not Hiccup.”

He stared at her, not comprehending.

“That’s...” she trailed off as the Night Fury began to scrabble in the ash with its claws.

Stoick rose to his feet, wondering what the dragon was doing that was so important. He watched, speechless, as it carved runes into the dirt.

‘MUNINN’ it wrote.

Stoick blinked. “One of Odin’s...?”

“No,” Astrid cut him off. “It’s her name.” She looked at the Night Fury, it nodded. “The dragons don’t remember the names their parents gave them - its a side-effect of being controlled by the
Queen - so Hiccup...

Stoick didn’t hear anything else she said after that single, magical, word.

He stared at the dragon - the male Night Fury - beside her, through eyes blurry with fresh tears. “Son...”

The Night Fury cleared the ground in front of him with a sweep of his tail and wrote one word.

‘DAD’

For seven generations, Vikings and dragons had been mortal enemies. Stoick threw all of that aside without a thought. He lunged forwards, wrapping his arms around the Night Fury’s neck.

The black dragon - his son! - grunted in surprise, but didn’t pull away.

“Oh, Hiccup...” Stoick breathed. “You came back alive!”

Hiccup hummed softly, his hot breath brushing over Stoick’s ear.

Stoick pulled back, looking his son in the eye. Now that he was aware of it, he could see his son’s distinctive spark of intelligence in the great reptilian eye. But there was also pain in there.

There’s been pain there most of the time you’ve known him, he thought bitterly.

But this wasn’t the old, familiar heartache; this was fresh.

Pain he’d caused.

Everything he’d done to the Night Furies, everything he’d done in the name of revenge, he’d been doing to his own son.

What kind of father did that make him?

“Gods, son, I’m so sorry...”

Stormfly chirped, nudging Astrid’s arm. She turned to face the Nadder, thankful for an excuse to look away from the intimate family reunion happening before them.

“What is it, girl?”

Since they’d landed, her Nadder hadn’t strayed more than a single pace away. Astrid couldn’t blame her - she shuddered just thinking of that terrible moment when in one instant they were safe, flying together, and in the next she was alone, plummeting towards the ground.

Stormfly turned away from her with a short trill. Astrid followed her gaze; the smoke had all but cleared now, and a wide circle of stunned survivors had formed around them. Behind the Vikings a second ring was forming, as dragons that had fled the Queen’s rampage returned to the beach, blinking at their surroundings and conversing in confused growls.

Both sides eyed each other warily, but, for the moment, neither seemed willing to restart the conflict.

“Come on,” she said. “Let’s give them some privacy.”
The crowd parted before her as she approached, eyes locking onto Stormfly and hands drifting towards weapons.

The Vikings’ nervous whispers carried to her on the breeze.

“It’s not attacking, none of them are, what do we do?”

“They can’t be trusted, ready your weapons.”

“No, that Nadder saved Stoick’s life, Úlfur saw it.”

“Are you sure? Sven said he saw a Nightmare carry off Stoick.”

“No, you dolt! Look! Stoick’s right there!”

“Is that a Night Fury?”

Eventually, Astrid stood in the gap between the Berkians and the dragons. She turned to face her people. “The dragons are not our enemies,” she announced. “The big one the Night Furies - yes, they are Night Furies - killed was their Queen; she was the one who made them raid us. Now that she’s gone, they just want to live in peace, like us.” She emphasised her point by placing her hand on Stormfly’s neck.

A hundred stares focused on her; some merely blank, others outright hostile.

“The only peaceful dragon is a dead one!” Someone shouted, earning a murmur of approval.

Astrid clenched her fists, inhaling sharply. Before she could snap at the man, Stormfly swung her head into view with a soothing trill.

Her Nadder’s golden stare met her own.

Astrid sighed softly. “You’re right, girl.” Now was not the time for this; the battle was too fresh in everyone’s minds. She scanned the people in front of her; they were warriors, what they needed was orders.

She couldn’t see Stoick through the mass of Vikings, but she didn’t think he’d be in a state to give them any time soon.

Astrid thought quickly. Her uncle had drilled the basics of wilderness survival into her almost as soon as she could speak. The same principles applied whether it was a single warrior or an entire raiding party. She rested a hand on Stormfly’s flank and took a deep breath.

“Listen up! With the fleet gone, we’re going to be stuck here a while. We need to organize before we lose the light!

“Our first priority is the wounded. Get a healing station set up and start ferrying people to it. Second, we need to salvage what we can from the fleet. Comb the beach, if it’s usable, drag it here, above the high-tide mark, if it’s not, break it down for firewood.”

“Well, you heard the lassie!” A familiar voice shouted. “Get movin’!”

Used to recovering after the chaos inflicted by the raids, the villagers didn’t need any more instruction. A series of shouts went up as they split into teams, and in the space of a minute the crowd began to dissolve.
Astrid felt a flush of embarrassment as Gobber hobbled up to her. “Gobber, Sir, I’m sorry, I-” She’d totally ignored the chain of command.

“Don’t be,” he cut in. “You were doing a good job.” He looked from her to Stormfly. “Nice to see ya again, you overgrown chicken.”

Her Nadder chirped back at him, nonplussed.

“Her name is Stormfly,” Astrid told him. “Stormfly, this is Gobber.”

“We’ve met.” The smith commented drily. His next words were cut off as three dragons swooped towards them, their wings throwing up choking clouds of ash. The smith tensed beside her. Astrid held out a hand to stop him, but there was no need.

As soon as the lead Nightmare touched down, a figure leapt from his neck and rushed towards them.

“Sis!” Orvar exclaimed, throwing his arms around her. “You’re alive! I saw you fall! I thought you were...”

Astrid returned the embrace. “I’m okay, Orvy.” She looked up, over her little brother’s shoulder. Fishlegs and the Twins stood beside their dragons a few paces away.

She let out a sigh of relief. “You’re all okay.”

As the rush of battle receded, realisation of what they’d accomplished crept in to replace it. They’d stood up against the Queen, and not only had they survived; they’d beaten her!

“We did it,” she breathed. “It’s over. We won.”

“Hold your horses there, lassie,” Gobber cut in. “We’re not out of the woods quite yet.”

Astrid turned to him. “What is it?”

“Food,” the smith replied. “If we’re lucky, we’ll find a few sacks that aren’t too burnt or waterlogged, but that won’t feed this lot for very long.” He gestured to the beach around them, which was now bustling with activity.

Astrid swore under her breath. It wasn’t fair. They survived the flock, and beat the Queen, only to starve to death on this barren beach.

“Uh, about that,” Fishlegs spoke up. “I was just thinking,” he looked around. The ring of dragons had split up, some flying back up to the nest, others sitting on the beach in small groups, content to stay out of the way of the Vikings.

“If we take a low estimate of the population of the nest,” Fishlegs continued. “And a guess at how much an adult dragon eats, then, based on the average amount of food they steal on a raid, multiplied by the number of villages within range...”

“Get to the point, lad.”

He gulped, suddenly realising they were all looking at him. “The dragons couldn’t get enough food just from raiding! And that’s not accounting for how much the Queen must have eaten. They must have another food source!”

Astrid suddenly remembered her first, terrifying, trip to the nest. “You’re right!” she exclaimed.
“Everything they stole was fed to the Queen, the dragons didn’t eat any of it themselves!”

Fishlegs’ eyes lit up. “I knew it! It never made sense why they bothered raiding us, when they had all the food they could possibly need on their doorstep.” He gestured towards the ocean beyond the fog banks.

“This is fascinating,” Gobber interrupted. “But in case you’ve forgotten: we don’t have any boats, and even if we did, we didn’t exactly pack for a fishing expedition.”

Before Astrid could respond, a gust of wind sent her stumbling forwards into a cloud of dust as their dragons took wing.

“Stormfly!” she cried after her dragon’s retreating form. “Come back!”

The Nadder turned to face her, hovering in place. Their eyes met over the distance. Stormfly chirped; trust me.

“Okay girl,” Astrid whispered, with a slight nod of her head.

Stormfly turned away from her, circling over one of the groups of the former flock. She called to them for a few moments, and they took flight, climbing up to join the Nadder as she headed into the mists, out to sea.

“Was it something I said?” asked Gobber, bemused.


The sun had slipped below the horizon, but light remained, cast by a dozen bonfires scattered along the beach. Occasionally a loud snap was heard above the murmur of the Vikings crowded around the flames, as flurry of sparks soared into the night sky.

Astrid stood at the edge of the ring of light cast by one of the fires, Stormfly by her side. It had taken some convincing to get the Vikings to eat food that had been in a dragon’s stomach, but eventually their hungry bellies had won out, and the mound of fish coughed up by the dragons had been more than enough to feed everyone on the beach.

She stretched out her arm, gently caressing Stormfly’s neck. She followed her hand with her eyes, admiring how the firelight played over her Nadder’s scales. Not for the first time that evening, she wondered what she’d done to earn the loyalty of such an incredible creature. Just when she thought she’d done enough to pay back the debt she owed the dragon, she outdid herself, saving the village for a second time in one day.

A golden eye flashed in the firelight as Stormfly turned to look at her, a curious hum vibrating through Astrid’s palm.

“Thank you,” Astrid whispered. “For everything.”

Stormfly hummed louder, arching her neck into their contact.

A raucous cheer rose up from the Vikings. Astrid looked up as Gobber stepped into the ring of firelight, a barrel under one arm and a brace of tankards in his hand. A space was quickly cleared for him, and he sat down. Amber liquid sparkled as he began to pour.
“Is that mead?!” Astrid thought aloud. “Where the Hel did he find that?”

Soon, everyone around the fire had a drink in their hand. While the others lifted their mugs to their lips, Gobber raised his into the air and sang, tunelessly:

“After the long hard days,  
Of hunting and of war,  
Our throats are tired and thirsty,  
And our bodies drenched in gore.

“But we won’t waste our evenings  
Feeling tired and feeling spent...”

The rest of the crowd joined in. “We perk right up when we breathe in that wholesome honey scent!

“That Abbasid Brandy;  
Too fruity for these tongues!  
You can keep your fancy Roman wine;  
It tastes like Gronkle dung!”

They went on for several verses, criticising every alcoholic beverage in the known world and growing increasingly boisterous.

“You can keep your filthy poppy;  
It makes our bellies bleed!  
‘Cause when we raise our flagon  
To another dead-”

Silence. All eyes turned to Stormfly.

Unperturbed, Gobber continued in a hoarse yell. “There’s just one drink we need!”

“Norse mead!”

Astrid couldn’t help but chuckle at the sheer absurdity of it all; of Vikings singing drinking songs that had been sung on winter nights in Berk’s mead hall for seven generations, while dragons lounged mere feet away.

She had been worried that this peace wouldn’t last; that Berk had suffered too much pain at the claws of the flock to just move on. But her village was a hardy and resourceful people; as long as they had booze they could weather anything.

She turned away from the fire as the crowd began a chant of “Chug a mug of mead!” Stormfly trilled softly and followed as she stepped into the darkness. Astrid wove between the bonfires, making her way along the beach, towards where the Queen had landed.

As her eyes adjusted to the gloom, the sky began to glow a faint green - the northern lights shining down through the fog.

Muninn’s body hadn’t been moved from where she fell.

Astrid stood at the rim of the crater, looking down on where she lay. Hiccup had explained to her and Stoick that the Queen had massacred the Night Furies, and that Muninn was the last of her kind.
To most of Berk, the Night Fury was just another dead dragon on a beach littered with them. To Astrid and Stormfly, she was the last remnant of a golden age; perhaps the last being who truly remembered what the dragons were like before the Queen.

“Who were you?” Astrid murmured. “You went through so much... how did you keep going?”

The only reply was the lonely whistling of wind through the sea stacks.

“I’m sorry...” Astrid looked down at her feet. “That we never got to know you; that all you knew of humanity was imprisonment... I’m not a Skald, but I - we - will remember you... what you sacrificed for us.”

Beside her, Stormfly hummed in agreement.

A flicker of green light caught Astrid’s eye. Her gaze snapped up to Muninn’s body. A scale caught the light of the Aurora somehow? She looked up. The clouds still hung thick over the island.

Breathless, she turned to her Nadder. “Did you see that?”

Stormfly didn’t reply, staring intently at Muninn.

Astrid cautiously slid down into the crater. The light flickered again.

This time she saw it.

A wisp of emerald light, curling in on itself like smoke as it rose from Muninn’s body.

A flash of green. Another stream of light drifted up from the Night Fury.

Astrid froze, transfixed by the sight.

The light grew brighter as more wisps joined the first. Soon the strange energy rose from Muninn’s scales like glowing steam.

The last Night Fury’s eyes snapped open. She drew in a shuddering gasp.

Chapter End Notes

Mythology:
Týr - One of the Æsir, associated with law and heroic glory. Often equated with Mars in the Greco-Roman pantheon.
Niðhögg - A mythical serpent who gnaws at a root of the world tree, Yggdrasil. In Hel, it chews on the corpses of those guilty of murder, adultery, and oath-breaking.

Lyrics of Gobber’s drinking song adapted from 'Nord Mead' by Miracle of Sound
“You can yearn for life to be simple or,
You can learn from strife, let it build your core;
And refuse, refuse, refuse,
Don't you bow to the abuse...”

Epilogue: Dawn of the Night

The towering sentinels that watched over Berk’s harbour were stone reflections of her people; rugged and weatherbeaten, they clung doggedly to the rocks despite generations of storms’ effort to dislodge them.

As their rough-carved features peeked over the horizon, a large figure stepped up to the prow of the battered longship below Hiccup. He didn’t need a Night Fury’s eyes to recognise the red-haired giant shouting encouragement to the exhausted sailors.

A weary cheer came from the crew; they had spent most of the last week at sea, battling against the elements to return Berk’s warriors before the ice set in. Now, home was in sight, and with their chieftain aboard, they knew they could finally rest - as, of course, Stoick the Vast had refused to set foot on a ship until he was the last Viking on the beach.

Hiccup let out a small sigh of relief; everyone had made it back okay. However, the moment was also tinged with sadness; his father’s return meant he couldn’t delay their plans any longer...

The whistle of air over a Night Fury’s fins cut through his thoughts.

Muninn’s wings opened with a taut snap. “Hey!” He called, glancing sideways; she flew straight and level, the air parting smoothly over her sinuous form. “You’re flying a lot better today,” he commented. “I take it your fin is fully healed?”

“Yes!” she replied, flexing her tail - and weaving back and forth in the air. “I feel like I could fly for days!”

Hiccup said nothing, staring down at his father. He wondered if Stoick even realised they were watching.

“So,” Muninn broke the silence. She peered at the longship beneath them. “That’s your sire?”

“Aye, Chief Stoick Haddock ‘The Vast’ of Berk; the only Viking chief in the world with a Night Fury as heir.”

Officially, at least, he added; if his former people objected to being led by a Hiccup, he doubted they would accept a dragon much better.

“Which one’s your dam?”

“She’s dead.”
“Oh, I’m sorry, I-”

“It’s okay,” he interrupted. “I don’t really remember her; she was taken a few months after I was born.”

“Taken?”

He sighed. “Yes. According to my dad, a dragon broke into our house one night and carried her off, screaming, in its claws.” He looked to the Night Fury beside him. “Do you...?“

Muninn winced. “No,” she replied eventually. “All the raids I remember, She never made us take any Humans alive.” She met his gaze. “I’m sorry, Hiccup.”

“It’s fine,” he told her. “If anything, I should be the one apologizing; I know it’s not easy, thinking about... those things.” Every night since the battle, his dreams had been full of blood and fire; be it Berk, Dökkhöfn, or the shores of the Nest; the screams were always the same.

He couldn’t begin to imagine what it must be like having lived a lifetime of that.

He shook himself, focusing on the tiny ship far below them, judging the distance between them and the island.

“I’m heading back,” he told Muninn, turning towards Berk. “It will be at least an hour before they land.”

Hiccup increased his pace as he flew homewards. The wind roared in his ears. The air caressed his scales as it split over his body. He closed his eyes, luxuriating in the feeling. The days after the Queen’s defeat hadn’t been easy, and simply flying had become his escape.

When the memories threatened to drown out his thoughts, or he found himself staring longingly towards Gobber’s forge, he could push off and leave it all behind for a few precious moments. The feeling of the wind rushing past him, and of power in his wings as they beat against the air; the sheer freedom of soaring a mile above the ocean, it reminded him that things could, and would, change for the better.

The view beneath him certainly helped.

When Stoick docked, he would barely recognise Berk as the same wet heap of rock he’d left behind. Hiccup dipped his wing slightly, banking in a wide arc over the village. When he, Muninn and the Riders - as Astrid and the other teens had come to be known - had left the nest, they hadn’t been expecting the flock to follow them en masse.

Now, the roofs of the village were buried beneath a riot of different coloured dragons, with many more spread out over the nearby fields - much to the initial panic of the shepherds. Stormfly’s initiative to feed the Vikings on the beach had taken on a life of its own amongst the flock, and the village had found itself so inundated with gifts of fish, that they’d taken to using the raid torches as communal feeding troughs.

Hiccup spotted the Nadder sitting on a patch of grass overlooking the docks, and spiralled down to join her. As he approached, his ear fins pricked and he heard her quietly chanting:

“High above the ground,
Beyond the thunderclouds,
A black shade is flying alone!
Once so feared among kin,
Now her legend is becoming too old..."

Stormfly looked up, then bowed to him and Muninn - who had caught up while he descended. "Greetings, Alphas."

Hiccup flared his wings and gently settled to the ground in front of her. "What was that you were singing?"

The Nadder looked away. "That was your song, Alpha."

"My song?"

Stormfly glanced at Muninn as she came in to land. "It's both of yours. The Songkeepers swore to remember the songs of the dragons of old. Now, thanks to the two of you, there are new stories to learn.

"Generations from now, hatchlings will look to their sires and their dams, and ask how the Queen was defeated; and then, in their darkest moments, when all hope seems lost, they will remember the story of how their kind was freed, and that as long as they are there to take it, there will always come a chance."

Stormfly inclined her head. "It is my duty and honour to add your song to my collection, Alphas."

Hiccup felt a flush of embarrassment. "I didn't do it to have songs written about me!" He objected. "It was the right thing to do! Anybody else would have done the same!"

Stormfly hummed softly, giving him a sympathetic look. "And that is why you will make a better Alpha than the Queen, Hiccup."

His ear-fins perked at the sound of footsteps. He looked up as Astrid crested the ramps leading from the harbour. "Hey, girl!" She called, walking over and holding her hand out to Stormfly, who eagerly nuzzled into it.

Astrid turned to face him. "Your dad just docked." Her expression became serious. "It's time."

"Are you ready?" he asked Muninn.

She nodded.

He turned back to Astrid and Stormfly.

'THANK YOU' he wrote in the dirt. "Both of you," he added, looking at Stormfly. 'FOR EVERYTHING.'

"And from me," Munin put in. "If you hadn't helped him... I wouldn't be here."

The Nadder mantled her wings and bowed formally. "It was an honour, my Alphas."

Astrid nervously held out her hand. Hiccup stepped forwards, touching his muzzle to her palm, as he had when they'd first trusted each other, which felt like so long ago.

"You're welcome," she whispered. Hiccup thought he saw a glimmer of moisture in the young Vikings eyes. "Hiccup, I..."

She trailed off, but Hiccup understood what she was trying to say; since he became a dragon, they'd discovered they had so much more in common than they thought possible. Perhaps, her eyes
told him, in another world, where things had gone differently, they could have been more than friends.

Hiccup hummed deeply and stepped back.

Astrid blinked, and the steely warrior the rest of the village knew returned. “Come on,” she said, “They’re waiting for you in the square.”

Fishlegs met them on the steps of the Mead Hall along with the Gronkle he rode in the battle. The large boy leapt to his feet as soon as he saw them approaching. “Hi Hiccup! Hi Muninn!”

Hiccup inclined his head in greeting.

“Guys! Uh... Ladies - what do you call female dragons? - and Hiccup, I finally came up with a name for him!” He gestured to the Gronkle. “Everyone, this is Meatlug.”

“Meatlug?!” Astrid repeated.

“Yeah, uh...” Fishlegs rubbed the back of his neck. “I couldn’t come up with a good name, so I, uh, shouted something in frustration, and it kind of stuck...”

Hiccup turned to the Gronkle in question. She twitched her wings in a shrug. “It’s as good a name as any. What matters is the one who gave it to me.”

Something occurred to him. “Wait a moment. Fishlegs called you ‘him’, aren’t you...?”

Meatlug sighed. “Yes, I’m female. I’ve tried to tell him, but he doesn’t understand.”

As if just remembering he was there, Fishlegs spun towards him, pulling out a book and charcoal pencil. “Oh, Hiccup! There’s so many things I wanted to ask you! How high can you fly? How fast? What’s your shot limit?”

Astrid held out a hand. “Slow down, he can only answer one question at a time.”

Fishlegs took a breath. “Okay, Have you felt any urges to hoard gold and jewels since becoming a dragon?”

Hiccup gave him a flat stare. He wrote three words in the dust.

‘I’M A VIKING.’

Fishlegs stared at his reply for a moment. “Oh. You, uh, have a point...”

Hiccup glanced at Meatlug. ‘FISH, THERE’S’

His runes were obscured by a cloud of dust as a Zippleback swooped low over their heads.

“Out of the way!” Ruffnut yelled.

“Barf and Belch coming through!” her twin finished.

The two-headed dragon backwinged at the last minute and landed heavily on the cobbles, nearly knocking over a group of villagers.

Hiccup sighed. The Thorstons had started calling the twin heads of the Zippleback ‘Barf’ and ‘Belch’ almost as soon as the battle was over, and nothing anyone said could change their minds.
That just left Orvar and the Nightmare. As if on cue, the crimson dragon touched down in an empty corner of square. He crouched down low - his belly scales nearly touching the cobbles.

The younger Hofferson child slid down from his neck. “Thanks, Hookfang,” he said, patting the Nightmare’s snout.

Hiccup addressed the three dragons. “You didn’t have to come back - you don’t owe these people anything.” He inclined his head. “Thank you.”

Hookfang stood up to his full height - the Nightmare seemed to have become the trio’s unofficial mouthpiece. “Stormfly trusts these Vikings; we trust her.”

Hiccup turned to the Nadder, she shuffled her wings uncomfortably. “Where Astrid goes, I go.”

“And,” Hookfang continued, looking over at Orvar. “These hatchlings flew with us against the Queen; whether they know it or not, we are wing-mates now.”

Hiccup nodded. If his former people shared any values with the dragons, it was appreciation of the bonds forged in battle with a common foe.

Before he could say anything else, there was a commotion on the far side of the square, as Stoick arrived, with seemingly the entire village in tow. The Berkians crammed into the courtyard, forming a tight ring around him and the dragons.

Hiccup’s wings twitched, and he growled low in his throat, barely suppressing the urge to leap into the air. Astrid shot him a concerned look.

He couldn’t help it; the last time this many Vikings had been near him, they’d been pinning him against the wall of the cove.

“I’m okay,” he said, “It's just bad memories.” He wasn’t sure if he was telling himself or Astrid.

Hiccup took a deep breath, and stepped forwards to meet his father. On the buildings around the square, the former flock raised their heads, watching the scene intently.

“Hiccup.”

“Dad.”

“You don’t have to do this, son. We can’t change overnight, but we’re making progress...” His voice cracked, taking on a pleading, almost begging, tone. “Just tell me what I need to do to make you stay!”

Hiccup’s heart ached. He almost caved; his father had been through enough, they didn’t need to do this now - they could wait until things settled down, at least until the spring thaw...

He looked back at Muninn.

‘IT WON’T WORK,’ he wrote, with a heavy paw. ‘YOU HURT ME.’

“Gods, son, I’m sorry...” Stoick murmured, so quiet he wasn’t sure if he was meant to hear.

‘AND,’ Hiccup continued. The screams of the Meatheads echoed in his ears. ‘I HURT ALL OF YOU.

‘IT’S FOR THE BEST. FOR BOTH OF US.’
Hiccup saw the moment Stoick realised he wouldn’t change his mind; his shoulders slumped, and his face took on a resigned expression.

“Where will you go?” he asked, hoarsely.

‘WEST - TOWARDS GRÆNLAND, I THINK.’

“Why? All you’ll find out there is ice and outcasts.”

‘MUNINN THINKS IT’S WHERE HER OLD HOME WAS. WE BOTH NEED TO LEARN ABOUT BEING FURIES - IT’S THE ONLY PLACE TO GO.

‘AND,’ he added, ‘IT’S FAR ENOUGH THAT WE’LL HAVE TIME TO PROCESS WHAT HAPPENED TO US.’

Hiccup cleared the ground with a sweep of his tail. ‘ALSO,’ he hesitated, ear-fins burning; If he was still human, he would have been blushing furiously.

“What is it, son?”

‘SHE’S THE LAST FEMALE FURY, AND I’M THE LAST MALE.’ It went unspoken between them, but both he and Muninn knew what they’d have to do eventually if their species was to continue.

“Hah!” Gobber barked, elbowing Stoick in the ribs. “I always told you not to worry about him, Stoick; that he’d have no trouble with the ladies!”

Hiccup tried to look anywhere other than at Gobber or his father.

“Same old Hiccup!” sneered a voice he’d hoped to forget. Snotlout pushed his way to the front of the crowd. “You haven’t changed, have you? As usual, you’ve screwed up everything!

He gestured wildly to the dragons surrounding them. “And now you’re leaving us to clean up your mess!”

Stormfly’s spines clattered behind Hiccup, an angry hiss issuing from the Nadder.

“You dare!” Astrid growled. “I ought to-!

Spitelout stepped out of the crowd and rested a hand on his son’s shoulder. “My boy has a point.” He swiveled his gaze onto Hiccup. “Stoick said the beasts look to you and the other devil as chiefs. What happens after you leave? What’s to stop them turning on us?”

A murmur of agreement came from the older members of the crowd.

Hiccup took a deep breath; he was worried something like this might happen. He turned to Astrid, and quickly scribbled ‘WILL YOU READ WHAT I WRITE, SO EVERYONE CAN HEAR?’

She nodded.

Hiccup stepped forwards to face Spitelout and his son, Astrid beside him. He felt a momentary thrill as he raised his claw and Snotlout’s eyes widened in fear.

‘THE DRAGONS WANT PEACE’ he wrote - and read aloud for the flock’s benefit.

He looked around, trying to meet the eyes of as many Vikings as he could.
‘HOW MANY OF YOU, HONESTLY, WANT TO KEEP FIGHTING?’

A few murmurs came from the crowd.

‘EVEN IF THAT MEANS SEEING MORE OF YOUR FRIENDS BURNED?’

Nobody said a word.

‘ALL OF US,’ he continued. ‘DRAGONS AND VIKINGS, SUFFERED IN THE QUEEN’S WAR.

‘YOU HAVE A SECOND CHANCE; A FRESH START.

‘YOU DON’T HAVE TO WELCOME THEM INTO YOUR HOMES AND NESTS OVERNIGHT, JUST TRUST THAT THEY WANT AN END TO THE BLOODSHED AS MUCH AS YOU.

‘IS THAT SO HARD?’

Hiccup looked up at the former flock. ‘MUNINN AND I HAVE TO GO, BUT YOU ARE NOT ALONE. WHEN YOU ARE READY TO MOVE FORWARDS, LOOK TO ASTRID AND STORMFLY,’ The Viking’s speech faltered as she read her name. ‘THEY WILL SHOW YOU THE WAY.’

He looked back at Snotlout; he was staring at Astrid, his mouth flapping open and closed, but no sound coming out.

Hiccup stepped back and faced Stormfly. “Was that enough?” he asked softly. “Will they listen to me?”

Stormfly bowed her head. “You spoke like a true Alpha.”

He turned to Astrid. ‘I’M TRUSTING YOU TWO TO KEEP THE PEACE,’ he wrote - still reading aloud for Stormfly’s sake.

Stormfly spread her wings and bowed formally. “As you command, my Alpha.”

Astrid laid a hand on her Nadder’s shoulder. “We’ll try our best, Hiccup.”

He turned back to face his father.

“So, this is it,” Stoick murmured.

‘I’M NOT LEAVING FOREVER,’ Hiccup wrote. ‘MUNINN AND I JUST NEED TIME. WE WILL COME BACK WHEN WE’RE BOTH READY. I PROMISE.’

“Hiccup,” Stoick began. “Every father hopes that one day their son will grow strong enough to leave them behind. I know I’ve not done anything to be worthy of it, but I’m proud.” His voice cracked. “I’m proud to call you my son.”

Hiccup’s eyes watered. He squinted through the tears as Stoick continued.

“I just wish it wasn’t like... this.”

‘YOU JUST GESTURED TO ALL OF ME’
Stoick chuckled, tears sparkling at the corners of his eyes.

“Goodbye, my son.”

‘GOODBYE, DAD.’

An audible sob came from Gobber. Hiccup looked over at him.

“You know me,” he said, wiping his eyes, “I hate goodbyes!” He took a steadying breath. “Good luck out there, and treat that lady dragon right, you hear me?” He brandished his hook in a vaguely threatening manner.

Hiccup felt a smile tug at the corners of his mouth. ‘I’LL MISS YOU, GOBBER.’

He turned to Astrid.

“Goodbye, Hiccup,” she whispered.

Stormfly bowed a final time. “Fly safe, my Alphas.”

‘GOOD LUCK,’ he wished them.

Finally, he turned to face Muninn. “Is it time?” He asked her.

“It’s time.”

The villagers backed off as Hiccup spread his pitch-black wings. He straightened his tail behind him, fanning out first his sub-wings, and then his tail fins. He crouched lower, feeling the strength in the bunched muscles lining his chest.

The breeze blowing through the village shifted. Hiccup felt the change on his sensitive flight surfaces and instinctively adjusted his fins to compensate.

He took one last look at the faces surrounding him. This is not the last time I see them, he told himself.

He launched himself into the air. A heartbeat later, his wings drove downwards, carrying him into the sky.

Hiccup circled his home a final time as Muninn rose up to join him. “Are you sure you want to do this?” He asked her. “You know what we’re going to find.”

“I am,” she replied. “All my life, I’ve wondered what happened to my parents that day... I know we’ll probably never find them, but...” she looked over at him. “I have to try.”

“Then let’s go!” Hiccup broke the circle, pointing his nose westward. His wings beat, and Berk shrank away behind him.

The wind whistled in the boy-turned-Night-Fury’s ears. The salty tang of fresh, sea air filled his nostrils. The winter sun shone down, warming the scales on his spine, sparking off the ocean far below, and making the icebergs tossed upon the waves glow, as if lit from within by blue-green light.

A surge of excitement filled him. Ever since he’d first seen his father’s sea charts as a boy, part of him had dreamed of escaping the confines of Berk and seeing all the world had to offer. Now, his eyes saw more than any human’s and his muscles brimmed with energy to carry him further and
faster than any Viking longship.

Hiccup looked to the side. Muninn soared alongside him, comfortably keeping pace. He fixed his eyes forwards.

Yes, he was leaving his home and everyone he had ever known behind, and he knew that the pain the Queen had inflicted on both of them would linger long after the physical scars faded. But he refused to let the shadows of the past consume him.

After all, they were Night Furies - their true strength came from darkness.

“...And as the night falls blue,
Watching from a bird’s eye view...”

Astrid shifted restlessly beneath her thin blanket. She opened her eyes. Above her, the Mead Hall’s vaulted ceiling was shrouded in darkness; the faint glow cast by the banked fire not enough to pierce the gloom. The only sounds to meet her ears were the quiet murmurs of slumbering Vikings.

She sighed softly, resigning herself to another night of fitful sleep. She almost wished that they were back on Helheim’s gate; despite the cold, and the damp, and the rocky ground, she had slept soundly; far better than she had the last week; warm, dry, and surrounded by her people.

As soon as she had laid down on the beach, Stormfly had extended her wing, sheltering her, like she had in the storm she was named for.

Astrid got to her feet; she couldn’t face another interminable night staring up at the stone arches. Carrying her blanket, she carefully picked her way around the sleeping bodies; perhaps some fresh air would help.

She slipped into the kitchens attached to the hall, then out through a side door, into the faintly green-lit night.

The village was quiet and still, the only movement high above her; gossamer curtains of emerald light drifting on an ethereal breeze. She stood there, eyes wandering over the slopes and roofs surrounding the hall - every surface packed tight with mounds of resting dragons. Her ears picked up a gentle murmuring; an undercurrent of soft coos and quiet growls, a sound not too different from the sleeping humans mere feet away.

A spark of reflected light caught Astrid’s eye. A dragon lay alone beside the Mead Hall steps, gazing up at the aurora, her eyes glimmering green. The Northern Lights painted everything below them in grassy shades, but she didn’t need to see colour to recognise her Nadder.

Stormfly cooed softly as she approached.

“Couldn’t sleep either, huh, girl?” Astrid asked, gently scratching the Nadder’s neck.

Stormfly purred deeply, arching into her fingers.

Astrid tilted her neck back, gazing up at the shifting patterns of light.

A deep sense of calm washed over her. After all the stress and anxiety of the past few weeks, the simple serenity of watching the stars with a friend felt incredibly soothing, like slipping into a hot bath after a hard day’s training.
Unfortunately, she couldn’t ignore the chill of the night for long, and a shiver went through her frame.

Stormfly cooed; Astrid looked down as her dragon shifted so that she lay on her side - legs stretched out before her - and raised her right wing

“Are you sure, girl? I can go back-”

The Nadder interrupted with a chirp, bumping Astrid’s hip with her muzzle - gently nudging the Viking towards her flank.

Astrid looked down at her blanket, almost forgotten in her left hand, she spread it out on the ground and then lay down, nestling close to her Nadder’s side. Stormfly hummed in contentment, curling around her, so her head lay beside Astrid’s own. Finally, she lowered her wing over the two of them.

Almost immediately, the chill vanished from the air trapped within the living tent.

Astrid closed her eyes and let out a long, slow breath, feeling all the tension and nervous energy trapped within her drain away. She lay there, in perfect darkness, listening as the gentle rhythm of air rushing in and out of Stormfly’s lungs slowed and evened out.

Careful not to wake her Nadder, Astrid raised her hand and ghosted her fingers over the membrane covering them.

Her fingertips passed over a small ridge. Astrid followed it, tracing the scar left by her knife.

A few short weeks ago, she would have thought being this close to a dragon was a death sentence. Now though, being here, safe and sheltered beneath her Stormfly’s wing, just felt... right.

Wait a moment. *Her* Stormfly?

How long had she been...?

She knew better than almost any Viking that dragons were thinking, feeling creatures, yet she *knew*, with that same sense of instinctive, unequivocal *rightness* that told her she was safe beneath her wing, that Stormfly was *hers*; and that the Nadder felt the same way about her.

Astrid looked over her memories of the time since they met with a critical eye, searching for when this possessive streak had started.

She kept coming back to her first trip to the nest; to the moment when Stormfly came back to her. In that instant, she had felt the Nadder’s emotions so keenly they were like her own.

Through Hiccup, Stormfly had told her that she was one of a rare breed of ‘normal’ dragons who could also use the power of the Queen and the Night Furies, but she hadn’t been aware of her heritage until that moment in the nest.

Astrid had been too focused on survival to notice it at the time, but something inexplicable had happened in their frantic flight from the nest. Before that moment she’d been a dead weight on Stormfly’s back, then, suddenly, she was moving with her dragon like she’d ridden all her life. It hadn’t just been terror and instinct guiding her motions, she’d felt it; then, and again as they wove through the chaos above the beach; an almost sixth sense, telling her how her Nadder was going to move.
As the realisation began to dawn on her, she felt it: a pinprick of light deep within her mind; alien, but also as intensely familiar as the Nadder curled around her. Instinctively, she reached for it.

Blue light flashed in the darkness.

Her eyes shot open. A familiar wisp of sapphire energy drifted up from her palm.

The faint glow illuminated an ugly pink scar slicing across her left hand - with all that had happened, she’d forgotten her little accident with the fish knife.

Astrid watched, breathless, as the scar rippled, then vanished before her eyes.

“... I won't lay down;
There's a darker shade of courage,
In the strength I've found,
And it's letting loose the savage side of me.”

- Miracle of Sound, ‘The Savage Side of Me’

Here ends the first song of the Age of Night

Chapter End Notes

Greenland - the old Norse name for Greenland. The first Norse settlement on the island was founded by Erik the Red in 986 CE after being exiled from Iceland for murder.

Stormfly's song lyrics adapted from ‘Deathbringer From The Sky’ by Finnish heavy metal band Ensiferum.

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